Parents’ use of Geographical Aspects of Charter Schools as Heuristic Devices in the School Choice Process

Thesis

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Abstract

Policy makers have increasingly turned to school choice and, particularly, charter schools, in an effort to increase educational quality and equity for elementary and high school students. Many school choice policies work under the assumption that parents, acting as rational agents, will choose the best possible school for their child when given the opportunity and, collectively, these choices will increase the aggregate quality of K-12 education. Parent rationality is an important component to this market-based model which is one aspect of a larger set of neoliberal reforms that reach far beyond education. This study draws on twelve interviews with fourteen parents and six observations of charter school informational meetings at two schools to argue that parents are not purely rational and thorough in their choice process. I argue that parents use heuristic devices—“efficient” mental approaches to select and analyze information surrounding a complicated decision—that rely on their experiences and memories of place-based geographical aspects of the schools in their choice sets. Parents came to understand the schools as geographical places through their experiences of certain aspects of the schools—the student body, the physical building, the surrounding community, and their sense of belonging or familiarity with the school. Parents did not make their school choice decisions in a careful, measured, and rational manner. Instead they relied on visceral memories, first impressions and experiences of the geographical aspects the schools they considered. This study adds to existing research that problematizes the
notion that parents will rationally choose the best schools for their children. It also
highlights several key issues that policy makers and school leaders can address in order to
help parents in their choice process.
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I. Introduction

Kathy opened one of the large front doors and walked into the main hallway of Brookestone High School\(^1\), a public urban school with over 1,000 students. Her son, Dylan, an eighth grader who went to a small, private middle school across town, walked closely behind her. Dylan is small for his age, at least a head shorter than many of the other boys in his class, and stayed close to Kathy as they weaved through the throng of students; most of whom looked far more mature than him. Kathy immediately noticed other physical differences between Dylan and the other children—her son was white and the vast majority of the children surrounding them were Black or Hispanic. Kathy also noticed the attitude of the students they passed. To her they seemed loud and irreverent, and they did not exhibit the same manners that her son, Dylan, was used to seeing at his private school. As lockers slammed shut, children ran past them, and students yelled past her to each other, Kathy immediately worried about what might happen to her son if he had to attend Brookestone as a freshman in the fall.

She made her way through the crowd of students, past the small underequipped school library and into the front office. Kathy was there to obtain a waiver for her son to enter the school lottery so he could attend a magnet school in the fall instead of Brookestone. She knew that obtaining the waiver form and getting a signature from

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\(^1\) All names of places and participants in this study have been changed.
someone at Brookestone was just the first part of a long and complicated process associated with the lottery that might take months to complete. Despite her confusion about where her son should attend high school and how she was going to get him enrolled, this trip to Brookestone High School was helpful. She had her doubts as she walked into the school that afternoon about whether Dylan should go to a magnet or charter school, or if it would be better just to let him go to Brookestone, the school he was assigned based on where they lived. Kathy knew that Brookestone did relatively well academically considering the challenges its student body faced, although she was not sure how it compared to the magnet or charter schools her son might attend. However, Kathy was sure her son would not be going to Brookestone next fall after the brief encounter with the student body.

Study Overview

This study focuses on 14 parents in a large city in Ohio who were in the process of searching for a charter school for their child. Over the past two decades policies have increasingly relied on parental choice to solve problems of educational quality. Policy makers often envision parents as informed and rational choosers but it is rapidly becoming clear that parents do not always make their choices in fully rational manners. A key component in parental choice processes is the use of heuristic devices—mental shortcuts in the decision making process that replace fully rational decisions. One way that parents took shortcuts in their decision making process was to employ heuristics derived from conceptions of schools’ geography of place—aspects of the school that
helped parents make meaning of it and identify it in their minds. These aspects include the physical characteristics of the school, student demographics, the community surrounding the school, and parents’ familiarity with the staff, students, policies and practices of the school. This study focuses on parents’ use of a specific type of heuristic—the availability heuristic—which draws on “available” or visceral memories and experiences to aid the decision making processes. Individuals who employ the availability heuristic typically believe that because an experience is readily available and easy to recall, it must occur frequently or be significant. While the availability heuristic can shorten the decision making process and reduce the amount of information that people need to gather and the effort associated with gather that information, it can also lead to unwarranted biases. Kathy’s story, detailed above, is a good example of the use of the availability heuristic in the school search process. She did not know much about the academic quality of the school in question but she was able to make a decision because of her initial visceral impression of the student body at Brookesone High School.

This study adds to the growing body of literature that undermines the belief that parents are purely rational in their school search process and that their choices will lead to the creation of identifiable market-based incentives that will, in turn, increase the aggregate quality of education as schools compete to identify and respond to students’ educational needs. Furthermore, this study has implications for how schools and policy makers should approach school choice practices; in terms of how they communicate with parents and how they structure the processes through which parents search for schools.
II. Methodology

This research is based on 12 interviews that were conducted with 13 parents and one grandparent between February and July of 2012. Two of the interviews took place with multiple people—Terrance and Bernadette were a husband and wife with a son who was going into the 9th grade. Monica brought her mother, Latoya, to the interview because Latoya had been engaged in the bulk of the work to get her 8th grade granddaughter into a charter school for the next school year. Throughout this research, I refer to everyone involved as “parents” because they fulfilled the role of a parent in their work to advocate for the educational well-being of their child. Furthermore, much of the theory that I employ is based on “mothering” and “mother’s work” because mothers tend to play a larger role in the practices of searching for schools, enrolling their children, and advocating for themselves and their families (Andre-Bechely, 1999; 2005; Cooper, 2005; 2007). The only male to participate in this study was Terrance who shared the work of the school search process with his wife Bernadette.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and covered topics related to parents’ school search process. Each interview followed a fairly unstructured format so parents’ could describe their search process without being too directly impacted or guided by my questions. I intentionally used open-ended questions in an attempted to keep participant responses on track without being too direct about the course their answers should take (Bloom, 1998). Additionally, interviews were conversational in an attempt to get parents to open up about their “everyday” lives in the midst of the search process.
This approach allowed parents to describe their process without the strict guidelines that might be imposed by close-ended questions, surveys, or quantitative methods of inquiry.

Interviews was transcribed and coded according to the grounded theory approach described by Glaser and Strauss (1979). Once coding was completed for all 12 interviews I was able to inductively identify a set of categories related to parents’ search process. After each category was established, I wrote memos that dealt with parent data and considered relevant theories and related research throughout the process. After the memos were complete for each of the inductively established categories, I reorganized my categories as I read more theory and incorporated my data in different ways. I then added new categories to account for new theoretical topics that arose during the memo writing process. Finally, I wrote out the basic flow of each interview into an interview summary and compiled, in narrative form, certain stories that parents relayed to me about their search process (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This approach allowed me to identify narratives within parent interviews. Throughout the interview process parents relayed richly detailed stories about the work they engaged in to enroll their child into a school that they liked, and the trials and triumphs that they faced along the way. Narratives are key to understanding parents’ choice work because they engaged in processes that took place over time and in stages. Therefore, their explanations of their work processes lent themselves to narrative retellings.

This research study incorporated parent interview data in two ways. First, small quotations are presented to make specific points about parents’ search process, especially if they are related to a key category within the research (i.e., social networks, information
gathering, familiarizing oneself with a school). This approach allows me to make comparisons between parents’ experiences, highlight singular but vital aspects of their work to search for a school, and point out key events or situations that contributed to the direction of their search process. The second way that data is presented is in longer narrative form. Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz describe the importance of relaying interview data through narrative, especially in the parents’ own words. They claim of their own qualitative work related to school choice, “The extracts from interviews . . . are more than usually inadequate in what they can convey, they are very much ripped out of context and lose impact and effect as a result. Choice making is typically accounted for by parents in terms of long narratives or a complex social calculus of compromises and constraints” (1995, p. 53). With this in mind, I have provided detailed accounts of five of the parents in this study with an emphasis on their stories and explanations when at all possible. When data is presented in smaller chunks I have done my best to frame it in terms of its context within the interview and not to divorce it from its place in the parents’ search process.

The sample for this study is purposive—all participants had a specific characteristic in common—and is not intended to yield generalizable outcomes (Johnson & Christiansen, 2008, p. 239). This study is specifically focused on parents who are in the midst of the search process for a charter school for their child. Therefore, a sample taken from all parents of school-aged children would be too broad. Furthermore, there is a danger in taking a sample from all parents of school-aged children in charter schools because the demands of the search process and the experiences that parents have might
change year to year. It is likely that parents’ memories of their search experiences would
become fuzzy over time and would be altered by their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with
the decisions they made (i.e., if a parent was unhappy with their choice, they may relay
inaccurate or biased information about their experiences). I also took a convenience
sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 238) because I recruited parents who were
available to speak to me at the time of my data collection. Additionally, the needs of this
study are so specific that it would have been impractical to try to draw out appropriate
parent participants from the general population. Charter school informational meetings
provided excellent access to convenience samples because they drew parents who were
specifically in the midst of their school search. Everyone who comes to a charter school
informational meeting, disregarding researchers, of course, is in the process of searching
for a charter school for their child. No two parents who participated in this study where at
the exact same point in their search. However, all parent participants were at some point
between the initial moment where they decided to search for other school options and the
point where they made an official decision to enroll in a specific charter school.

III. Theoretical Approach: Institutional Ethnography

This study is an institutional ethnography of the institutions surrounding the
school search process in a large urban area in Ohio. An institutional ethnography is the
study of an institution which begins with the experiences, or standpoint, of those who
interact within and work to gain access to the institution. This is opposed to a top-down
approach that might focus on measurable but abstract aspects of the whole institution
such as totals and averages. Institutional ethnographies start with the premise that institutional practices and structures, particularly those that are mediated through texts, shape individuals’ experiences in profound and meaningful ways. (Smith, 1987, 2005; DeVault & McCoy, 2002).

Institutional ethnography makes up the theoretical basis for a large body of research across content fields (Andre Bechely, 1999; 2005; 2007; Pence, 2001; Mykhalovskiy & McCoy, 2002; McGibbon, Peter, & Gallop, 2010, McNeil, 2008). It is focused on the “everyday” work of people (Andre Bechely, 1999; Smith, 1987; Devault & McCoy, 2002) and values the analysis of personal experiences, actions, and socially constructed positions over opinions, statistics, or large-scale phenomena. Furthermore, an institutional ethnography allows for a focus on women and, specifically, women’s work that comes along with mothering (Cooper, 2005; 2007; Andre Bechely, 2001; 2005; Smith, 1987; Griffith & Smith, 2004). Women’s work is often outside of the realm of the “official” worlds of the economy, professional institutions, business, and government. Therefore, it can be difficult to quantify or neatly categorize findings in generalizable or easily recognizable ways (Smith, 1987). Perhaps the greatest contribution provided by institutional ethnography is the focus on individuals’ personal experiences or “standpoints” and the actions they take as they navigate within a larger institutional framework. In this case “institution” refers to the network of public, charter, private, and magnet schools that parents must navigate in the choice process.

An institutional ethnological approach does not seek to uncover subjects’ opinions about certain topics or to extract quantifiable data about particular practices that are
predetermined at the beginning of the study. Rather, parents in this study were asked to convey their experiences of navigating through institutional structures and overcoming barriers to themselves and their children. Nespor and Hicks describe their use of institutional ethnography for a study on parents of disabled students, explaining, “We treat the accounts as analyses in their own right...That is, we do not use them to try to uncover the mothers’ subjective states, but to trace the contours of the institutional practices and structure with which the mothers contended” (2010, p. 314). Related to this, as parents move through the processes associated with gaining access into an institution, they must take certain actions and move through the process in certain ways. If generalizable trends, practices, or identifiable structures emerge in this type of study it is because the institution in question is shaping the parents’ experiences and practices in similar observable ways. Devault and McCoy explain this notion of institutional ethnography, saying,

Analytically fundamental to this approach [institutional ethnography] is an ontology that views the social as the concerted of people’s activities. . . . Smith expands this through the concept of social relations . . . the coordinating of people’s activities on a large scale, as this occurs in and across multiple sites, involving the activities of people who are not known to each other and who do not meet face-to-face (Devault & McCoy, 2002, p. 17).

A key beginning point within the institutional ethnography, and the starting point of analysis for this study, is the standpoint of mothers who are in the process of searching for a charter school. Although there are many approaches to it, this is often referred to as “feminist standpoint theory.” Dorothy Smith acknowledged the importance of beginning an institutional ethnography from a “woman’s standpoint,” saying,
“‘Standpoint’ as the design of a subject position in institutional ethnography creates a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge of society or political economy. It is a method of inquiry that works from the actualities of people’s everyday lives and experience to discover the social as it extends beyond experience” (Smith, 2005, p. 327).

Camille Wilson Cooper explains, “Feminist standpoint theory urges researchers who study women to place women’s lives at the center of analysis in order to gain a better understanding of them and how sociopolitical structures impact their lives. . . . Researchers then move outward from their participants’ standpoint to critique the sociopolitical structures in which they interact” (2007, p. 495). Therefore, women’s everyday lives are analyzed over the lives of more privileged subjects (i.e., upper-class white males).

A critical component in standpoint theory is the notion of the “everyday” lives of women as they interact with large, socially-structured institutions. The focus on the everyday lives of people is a reaction to the overvaluation of “official” points of study and allowing ruling entities such as the state, wealth, and male-dominated institutions define for researchers what is worth knowing and what is able to be studied. Often left out of this mix is the day-to-day work that people do in order to “get by.” (Dickens, 1990, p. 17). Dorothy Smith explains,

“The ‘established’ sociology . . . gives us a consciousness that looks at society, social relations, and people’s lives as if we could stand outside them, ignoring the particular local places in the everyday in which we live our lives. It claims objectivity not on the basis of its capacity to speak truthfully, but in terms of its specific capacity to exclude the presence and experience of particular subjectivities” (1987, p. 2).
In other words, dominant forms of sociology often focus on “objective” facts and figures that exclude the everyday experiences of subjects under study. This allows for claims of objectivity but often leaves out important details about how subjects live their lives and are impacted by and within the institutions in which they are enmeshed. Feminist standpoint theory is critical to this study because it allows for a focus on the everyday lives of the parents, mostly women, who navigate the school search process.

The institution that is the topic of this study can be somewhat hard to define. While all participants considered a set of schools, no two parents’ choice sets were the same. Parental choice sets are defined in this study as the group of schools from which parents actively choose. Simply stated, a choice set is the group or set from which an individual chooses. This is not to suggest that choice sets are simply the product of individuals preferences or choices. In terms of schools, choice sets are determined by “contextual factors . . . that are directly linked to the current distribution of educational opportunities” (Bell, 2005, p. 31). Parents’ choice sets included any school that they considered at any point in the search process, however brief. Because choice sets vary widely between parents it is impossible to place definite boundaries on the institution in which parents conducted their search process.

The institution is much bigger than just the schools within the city where this study took place. It extends beyond a defined set of schools to include local, state, and federal educational policies concerning school choice, practices defined and implemented by private entities such as charitable foundations. It also is shaped by non-educational practices and policies such as the creation of bus-routes, city zoning ordinances, and
socioeconomic, class, and race patterns that exist within and between different communities. Dorothy Smith, who introduced the term “institutional ethnography,” describes institutions as,

a complex of relations forming part of the ruling apparatus, organized around a distinctive function—education, health care, law, and the like. In contrast to such concepts as bureaucracy, ‘institution’ does not identify a determinate form of social organization, but rather the intersection and coordination of more than one relational mode of the ruling apparatus” (Smith, 1987, p. 160).

To complicate matters further, the parents in this study only knew about a few traditional, charter, magnet or private schools from which they could choose. Most parents in this study acknowledged that they did not know about all possible options for their children. Their limited choice sets ensured that they would all approach the search process in different ways and would establish different points of entry into the institution in question. Each parent had a different view of what the “institution” was because each had a unique set of experiences within a very small and fragmented section of the “institution.”

While no two parents were alike in terms of their practices, experiences, choice sets, or knowledge, there were some similarities that draw them together. First, each of the parents looked at one or both schools associated with this study—The McKinley School and The Taft School. There was a temporal component that drew parents together as well. They all conducted searches at some point in the spring or summer of 2012. Furthermore, I approached parents at informational meetings in order to set up interviews. This ensured that the parents who I interviewed were in similar phases of
their search process and, at the very least, they were engaged in the search process enough to attend an informational meeting at one or both of the schools in question.

There is no single correct way to conduct an institutional ethnography. For the purposes of this study, I centered my analysis on two major components. First, parent interviews allowed me to understand the “standpoint” of parents as they engaged in the processes associated with searching for and gaining access to a charter school. Second, each parent in this study participated in at least one informational meeting at The Taft School or The McKinley School. One goal of institutional ethnography is to pay close attention to the texts that individuals encounter as they move through institutional processes because of the role that texts play in shaping individuals’ experiences, organizing institutional structures, and granting and limiting access (Andre Bechely, 1999; Devault & McCoy, 2002; Smith, 1987). An early goal of this study was to conduct a detailed analysis of the physical texts that parents encountered as they moved through the process of searching for and enrolling their child in a charter school. However, I quickly found out that parents did not use physical texts such as brochures or fliers in consistent ways and, sometimes, did not use these types of texts at all. The one consistent source of textual information that parents did use was internet-based sources but they did not use the same websites, or could not tell me exactly where online that they searched, for how long, or if they took any sort of systematic approach.

Texts are key to institutional ethnographies because they “happen . . . in time and place [within an institution] and [are] integral to organized sequences of action” (Smith, 2002, p. 67). In this sense, the informational meetings acted as an institutional text for
parents who participated in them because search processes were ordered around and directed by participation in informational meetings. These meetings also structured parents’ search process by requiring that they come to a certain place and structure their actions in a certain sequence. Devault and McCoy describe texts as “some kind of document or representation that has a relatively fixed and replicable character…” that “play a standardizing and mediating role” in the institutionally-located process in question (2002, p. 34). For the purposes of this study, the informational meetings act as institutionally produced texts. They are a representation of school practices and policies that is produced and replicated by the charter schools in question. Furthermore, they were fixed in character. The six meetings that I observed were run by the same people who followed a similar agenda. Therefore, the informational meetings provided a common, similar experience for parents that both ordered their search process and established a normative source of information for all parents in this study.

Informational Meetings as Institutional Texts

The informational meetings at the Taft and McKinley Schools served as institutional “texts” for parents as they sought to gain information in their search process. Each of the six meetings I observed, three at The Taft School and three at The McKinley School, was different in terms of the number of attendees, parent demographics, the questions that parents asked, date of occurrence, and the students and teachers who presented on behalf of the school. However, each meeting followed a similar pattern provided below (See Table 1 on p. 14).
These meetings were public events and I was able to talk briefly with administrators and teachers who presented. Administrators declined my requests to conduct recorded interviews but they spoke freely to me at the meetings and responded to any questions that I had. They claimed that they could not conduct interviews because they did not have the time. While it is possible that they did not want to go on the record or did not trust me in my role as researcher, I have no reason to doubt that they simply were too busy talk to me.

Informational meetings were key to my understanding of parents’ experiences in their search process for several reasons. First, meetings acted as an informational text that structured and guided parents’ search process. Each time that I observed an informational meeting I noticed that they replicated the manner in which they conveyed information and hit on the same key points regarding the school. Second, they structured parents’ activities in similar ways. Parents had to show up, usually around 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. on a Tuesday night, and sit through a meeting that typically lasted about an hour and a half. Louis Andre-Bechely discusses the way that institutional practices benefit some parents over others (1999). I observed this often as some parents came prepared with questions, wrote everything down and seemed to follow along with the meeting, and spent a significant amount of time discussing the school with a teacher or administrator afterward. Other parents, however, seemed to struggle with the meeting format because they brought their children along and had to discipline them, seemed unprepared, bored or unable to follow along (Informational Meeting Observation).
Table 1: Order of Operations at Informational Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>Meetings typically started with a welcome and introduction of every person who would be involved in the meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Greeting from Administrator</td>
<td>Administrator greetings typically involved information about the history of the school, mission of the school, logistical issues such as bussing and lunch, and other student-related issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Overview of the School</td>
<td>One or two teachers gave an overview of the school’s academics. This typically included unique lessons or learning opportunities that students could expect to engage in if they attended the school, teacher expectations for student work, expectations for student behavior, information on remediation and services for disabled students, and specific strategies that teachers employed to prepare students for college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Student Testimony</td>
<td>Student testimonies involved a student, typically a junior or senior, who had been particularly successful at the school. These testimonies always involved students’ experiences with helpful teachers, students’ sense of belonging and community at the school, students’ feelings of safety at the school, students’ experiences in extracurricular activities, and students’ future plans (always college).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Question and Answer Session</td>
<td>This was typically the longest part of the informational meeting. Parent questions typically centered on extracurricular activities, logistical information such as lunch and bussing, and class size. Parents also focused on the particular “mission” associated with each school. At the Taft School this was the early college education program and at The McKinley School this was the experiential internship program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Informational meetings served as points of institutional entry for parents who were interested in learning more about the school. These meetings also gave parents the chance to get to know administrators, teachers, and students, further structuring their
understanding of the school. They were also encouraged to sign up for a mailing list, set up an interview, or, in rare cases, actually enroll their child in the school the same evening as the informational meeting (Informational Meeting Observation). The informational meetings were key to parent’s introduction to and familiarization with the school as a geographical place. As parents reflected on the informational meetings in their interviews they were more likely to remember feeling comforted by the sense of familiarity that they established with the school than they were to recall facts and figures such as student test scores or other indicators of academic achievement.

IV. Charter Schools: A growing phenomenon

The move to implement school choice policies in the attempt to solve issues of quality and equity in education is not entirely new but it has grown rapidly in recent years (USDOE, 2010). Charter schools are one option for parents who seek choices beyond their traditional local public school. Charters are also a relatively new phenomenon but, like school choice policies in general, they are an option that parents and policy makers are increasingly employing (NCES, 2011, p. 24-25).
School choice in Ohio

This study focuses on parents who were interested in enrolling their children in one of two local charter schools, The Taft School and The McKinley School, which are located in a large city in Ohio. Ohio has a relatively long history of allowing the existence and expansion of charter schools within the state. The first bill allowing charter schools in the state passed in 1997 (ODE, 2010). Since that point despite numerous pieces of legislation that both expanded and limited charter schools (Department of Education, 2009), there has been steady growth in the number of charters within the state and the number of students who attend them (Van Lier, 2009; Lake, 2009; ODE, 2012a, p. 16-17). As of the 2011-12 school year there were over 100,000 students in 355 charter, or “community” schools, which account for about 6% of the public school enrollment throughout Ohio (ODE, 2012a, p. 2).
Ohio allows for the existence of two types of “community” or “charter” schools. First, “Conversion community schools are those in which part or all of an existing traditional public school building, or a building operated by a Joint Vocational School District or Educational Service Center, is transformed into a community school. These schools may be established in any public school district in the state” (ODE, 2012a, p. 5). The second type of charter school, “new start-up community schools,” may locate only in a district that meets the definition of a “challenged” school district at the time that the community school executes its contract” (ODE, 2012a, p. 5). Each of the “Big 8” districts in Ohio (Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown) fall under the “challenged” categorization. The Taft and McKinley Schools both fall into the second type, “new start-up community schools,” and exist within a traditional public school district that is labeled as “challenged.”

The Taft and McKinley Schools

The Taft and McKinley Schools are “sister” high schools within a network or district of charter schools including one elementary school, a middle school and two high schools. The schools’ stated mission are centered around a few common goals including implementing “experiential” education and instilling a disposition of “life-long learning” in their students (Observation). The McKinley School was founded in 2001. In the 2010-11 school year, it had an average daily enrollment of 232 students who were about 70% white, 20% African American, and 10% multiracial or non-reporting. Additionally, about 1/3 of the students were economically disadvantaged. The McKinley school was
designated under “Continuous Improvement” for 2010-11 (ODE, 2012b). The McKinley School is unique because it provides students with internships instead of regular classes two days out of the week. Students are in regular classrooms the other three days. A principal from the McKinley School explained this practice, claiming, “It allows our students to get real-world experiences that connect to their learning in the classroom” (Informational Meeting Observation).

The Taft School does not provide students with internships but instead focuses on “early college learning” (Informational Meeting Observation). The Taft School is connected to a small liberal arts university and works to prepare and enroll students in college courses by their junior year. Additionally, it is a five-year high school program rather than the traditional four years because “it allows us to provide a scaffold for our students from high school to college because a lot of students get lost along the way” (Informational Meeting Observation). The Taft School was founded in 2007 and, as the 2010-11 school year had an average daily attendance of 290. The Taft School is made up of about 75% African American students, 16% white, and 9% multi-racial or non-reporting. About 61% of its students are categorized as economically disadvantaged by the state of Ohio. The state of Ohio gave The Taft School a rating of effective (ODE, 2012b).

*Research on the Impact of Charter Schools*

The vast majority of academic research on charters nationwide leads to very tentative conclusions, some negative and some positive, about the impact of charter
schools on student achievement (Miron & Nelson, 2001; Smith, et al. 2011), while others came to a squarely negative conclusion about the overall effectiveness of charters (Schemo, 2004; CREDO, 2009a). The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University released a report in 2009 that recognized a robust national demand for more charter schools from parents and local communities, [but] it found that 17 percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools, while 37 percent of charter schools showed gains that were worse than their traditional public school counterparts, with 46 percent of charter schools demonstrating no significant difference (CREDO, 2009b, p. 1).

The same report showed that in Ohio “math gains for students attending charter schools were significantly below their traditional public school peers, with no discernible difference in reading performance” (CREDO, 2009b, p. 2). Other studies, typically conducted on individual states or districts, were too limited in scope to allow for generalizable conclusions about charter impact throughout the nation (Barr, 1999; Eberts & Hollnbeck, 2001; Henig, Moser, Holyoke & Lacireno-Paquet, 1998; Wells, et al. 1998). Regardless of the success or failure of charter school academic improvements, there are several reasons, often in conflict with one another, people support charter schooling.

Support for Charter Schools

One early idea for charter schools, envisioned by Massachusetts educator Ray Budde in the 1970s, called for a select group of teachers within an existing school who would simply write out a “charter” for the school and follow it (Budde, 1988). This charter would spell out the goals of the school and outline how it would be different from
traditional schools in the area. This model was popularized in 1988 by then president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, who, in a speech to the National Press Club, envisioned charters as a method for putting education in the hands of teachers who would have the freedom to teach as they saw fit (Shanker, 1988). The main idea behind Shanker’s early support was that teachers knew how to best determine and deliver appropriate content as experts in their field.

Others envision charter schools as mechanisms for addressing issues of equity between middle and upper class students and their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These charter school advocates typically frame the use of charters and choice in terms that address civil rights, educational equality, and notions of fairness between social classes (Abowitz, 2001; Brighouse, 2000, Peterson & Howell, 2003; Greene, 2000; Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2011, Will, 2011). In general, the argument goes, existing practices of assigning students school districts based on where they live reinforce class and race boundaries that disproportionately favor middle and upper class white students. If all parents and children can make decisions about where they want to attend school it is more likely that some of these boundaries will be crossed and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds will have a better chance of achieving a more equitable education. Multiple studies indicate that school choice alone does not significantly reduce educational inequality along class and race lines (Frankenberg, 2011; Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996; Howe, 2005; Koedel, Betts, & Rice, 2009) and may even reinforce segregation as parents and students often self-select into schools where the majority of the student body is similar to
them (Jacobs, 2011). Christopher Lubienski also found that some schools of choice may engage in practices that limit the participation of certain students in favor of others, leading to reinforced racial and class lines (Lubienski, 2005). Proponents of school choice as a means to advance civil rights, particularly Brighouse (2000), acknowledge the lack of significant results in terms of integration and inclusion but maintain that choice, if regulated correctly, can do much to alleviate the class and race disadvantages that are rampant in education.

*Neoliberal Support for Charter Schools*

The far more significant force in support of school choice is the “free market” or “neoliberal” ideology that is prevalent in many policy discussions surrounding education reform. The move to privatize education is part of a larger movement of neoliberal policies that are pervasive in government, education, healthcare, and business and that maximize the role of the individual as “entrepreneur” while minimizing the role of democratic citizenship (Boltadano, 2012). Neoliberalism can be explained through its impact in several key areas. First, individual citizens take on the role of consumer and creator and “manage” their own lives at all levels, including their own and their child’s education, healthcare, their work, and retirement. Individuals in this system become responsible for their own lives and the role of outside forces and systems—especially structural issues such as poverty, inequality, and racism—are viewed as minimal. Baltadano explains, “their goal in life is to be self-sufficient. They blame themselves for their own failures regardless of the structural constraints they may face” (2012, p. 493).
Second, outcomes are measured in terms of profit and loss while civil rights and social justice are minimized because their alleviation implies government intervention and the possibility of “profit loss” (e.g., anti-union efforts and efforts to fight environmental regulations). Third, neoliberalism is not simply a move back to laissez faire policies of the 19th century. Rather, neoliberalism finds new ways to enact control on citizens through standards, management techniques, and competition for jobs, money, and resources. While individuals seem to have more freedom on the surface, their actions are tightly controlled and highly regulated (Baltadono 2012; Ball, 2012). This is especially true of educational reforms which increasingly rely on state standards, teacher evaluations, and curriculum “scripts” to control and guide educational goals and outcomes. Finally, the state is limited to the role of “protector” of markets. The primary role of the state, as envisioned by advocates of neoliberalism, is to ensure that conditions that promote the flourishing of the market are created and protected. Government intervention beyond that role is often viewed as detrimental to the working of the market and, therefore, society (Baltadano, 2012; Brown, 2003; Buras & Apple, 2005; Wells, Slayton, & Scott, 2002).

John Chubb and Terry Moe produced the seminal work in support of market-based educational reforms, Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools. They explain that their goal for education is to establish a system where “the authority to make educational choices is radically decentralized…Schools compete for the support of parents and students, and parents and students are free to choose among schools. The system is built around decentralization, competition, and choice” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 189). This
pro-market, neo-liberal approach is multifaceted but generally breaks down into a few basic assumptions.

First, free-market advocates believe that school choice policies can increase competition between schools which will lead to aggregate improvements in education. Parents in this model are viewed as consumers who gather information about potential schools, weigh the costs and benefits of each possible choice, and “vote with their feet” by choosing the best school in their choice set (Armor & Peiser, 1997; Chubb & Moe, 1990; School Choice Made Simple; Wells, Slayton & Scott, 2002).

Second, market advocates believe that public education is highly bureaucratic and that bureaucracy prevents key reforms that would improve educational quality if they were implemented. Chubb and Moe claim that democratic approaches to education (i.e., traditional public schools that are managed between the state and district levels and operated by a publically elected school board) inevitably create areas of conflict between interest groups. They point out,

As long as that [public] authority exists and is available for use, public officials will come under intense pressure from social groups of all political stripes to use it. And when they do use it, they cannot blithely assume that their favored policies will be faithfully implemented by the heterogeneous population of principals and teachers below…They have little choice but to rely on formal rules and regulations (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 188).

As time goes on, conflicting interest groups, whether at the national, state, or local level, will impose certain bureaucratic rules and regulations onto schools. Bureaucracy, Chubb and Moe claim, “imposes goals, structures, and requirements that tell principals and teachers what to do and how to do it—denying them the discretion they need to exercise their expertise to develop and operate as teams” (1990, p. 187). This bureaucratic control
harms students because school leaders cannot make needed changes because interest groups such as unions, political parties, and other organizations make it difficult to take bold action to address problems in education. Also, the rigidity and complexity of bureaucratic institutions can make genuine, system-wide changes very difficult to implement. Therefore, even substantial changes in education will only yield mediocre results because of the rules, regulations imposed by political interests. Furthermore, as is the case in most politically managed organizations, most decisions are made through compromise so it is impossible to make a “best” decision. Instead, schools are stuck with decisions that fully satisfy no one (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Chubb and Moe place a significant part of the blame on teacher unions for maintaining the bureaucratic status quo (1990, p. 50-51). Although Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools was written in 1990, the anti-union sentiment is still very much alive in today’s debate about the privatization of education, bureaucratic practices in schooling, and other areas of reform (Higgins, 2013; Kocieniewski, 2012). Charter and private schools are generally staffed by non-union employees. Many charter supporters claim that the lack of unionization releases them from constraints in terms of hiring, firing, salary, and other staffing considerations, something Chubb and Moe believe will lead to educational improvements over time.

Another reason that many support charter schools is that they tend to be cheaper for the state to run than traditional public schools. Hoxby (2004) points out that even if charter schools show negligible gains in academic performance, it is worth increasing their presence because they cost less than traditional public schools. Hence, the public is
getting the same student educational outcomes for less money. Carr and Lear came to the same conclusion in an analysis of schools in Ohio, claiming that overall people saved money by funding charter schools through state tax revenues rather than personal property taxes (2008, p. 7).

Bast and Walberg claim that parents are able to make decisions regarding where to send their children to school that are equal to or better to the decisions made by experts’ at the state and district levels. “Experts” are defined as “administrators, school counselors, and principals” (Bast & Walberg, 2004, p. 343) but could be any official who helps decide where certain students will go to school. In short, Bast and Walberg use the term “expert” to denote anyone who holds a position which allows them to determine which students will go to certain traditional public schools. In the current educational landscape most students’ schools are chosen for them through the drawing of district lines. There are three main reasons, according to Bast and Walberg, that parents can be better choosers than experts. First, “the rewards for choosing correctly and the cost of mistakes are not as high for government officials as they are for parents.” Second, “government regulators are often captured by the industries they are supposed to regulate . . . . In the case of schools, this is apparent in the influence teacher unions exercise over most school principals, superintendents, and school boards.” Finally, “school board members focus on the needs of the median or typical voter, and so they neglect interests that are not widely shared” (Bast & Walbert, 2004, p. 434).

The strong majority of pro-school choice literature comes from non-academic, popular, or politically motivated sources. These advocates, while not a monolithic group,
tend to see choice as a panacea to most educational problems and promote an education system where the governments’ role ends at funding autonomous charter schools with few regulations or providing vouchers to parents of students who can choose their own private school (School Choice Made Simple; Will, 2011). These advocates are strongly neoliberal in terms of their support for the privatization of public goods and the use of market mechanisms for solving complex social and political problems. One key example of this “popular” advocacy for school choice policies can be found in a short cartoon video provided by The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

In the video, a narrator tells the story of two towns, “Choiceville” and “Districtville,” that have very different ways of providing groceries to their citizens. In “Choiceville,” “residents enjoy a wide variety of grocery shopping options.” Some who want fresh vegetables go to a store called the “Green Pea”, while others, who want good cuts of meat, go to the “Big Steer Butcher.” The narrator explains, “Because residents have a choice about where they spend their hard-earned dollars, supermarkets in Choiceville try very hard to keep their customers happy.” “Choiceville” is contrasted to “Districtville,” where, “For as long as residents can remember, the town has been divided into districts. Residents are required to pay into a general fund which then redistributes money to the grocery stores in town. . . . they may only shop at the store assigned to their geographic district.” The citizens of “Districtville” cannot find the types of groceries that they want and are subjected to low-quality, often stale products. The disparity in choice and grocery quality between “Choiceville” and “Districtville” is, of course, due to the lack of competition that exists in “Districtville.” The video then turns its attention to
schools, claiming, “In many ways, it’s not so different from how the U.S. education system works today.” In short, the same problems that plagued residents who were assigned to a specific grocery store in “districtville”—lackluster products, poor service, and few options—will plague parents and students who are assigned to a specific school. The video claims, however, that “fortunately, when we understand the problem it’s not difficult to identify a solution.” The solution is school choice. If parents are allowed to choose schools, competition will increase the quality and availability of services among all schools. If a school excels it will be rewarded. If a school fails it will either improve or be forced to shut down when parents move their children to other schools (School Choice Made Simple).

![Figure 2: “School Choice Made Simple” provides a good example of popular notions about school choice. Parents are represented here examining a map and informational fliers for different schools. The message is that parents can gather an appropriate amount of information and rationally analyze it. No parent who participated in this study organized their choice work in this manner.](image)
V. The Role of Parental Choice in Market-Oriented Educational Reforms

Parental choice is increasingly employed in state and federal educational policies. While there are literally thousands of policies at the state and local levels pertaining to school choice, two federal policies, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, have done much to promote parental choice in education today (NCLB, 2002, Democrats for Education Reform, 2009). First, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed by the Bush administration in 2001, emphasized the role of school accountability, parental choice, and flexibility for states, districts and schools in reforming education. In an executive summary of the NCLB act, the Bush administration explained its requirement that failing districts and schools provide other public options, including charter schools, to families who wished to move. They say,

LEAs [Local Educational Agencies] must give students attending schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring the opportunity to
attend a better public school, which may include a public charter school, within the school district. The district must provide transportation to the new school, and must use at least 5 percent of its Title I funds for this purpose, if needed (NCLB, 2002, p. 2).

Furthermore, the implementation of school choice policy under NCLB was wrapped up in a major proportion of Title I funding. “To help ensure that LEAs offer meaningful choices, the new law requires school districts to spend up to 20 percent of their Title I allocations to provide school choice and supplemental educational services to eligible students (NCLB, 2002, p. 2). The role of choice in educational improvement is clearly stated,

In addition to helping ensure that no child loses the opportunity for a quality education because he or she is trapped in a failing school, the choice and supplemental service requirements provide a substantial incentive for low-performing schools to improve. Schools that want to avoid losing students—along with the portion of their annual budgets typically associated with those students—will have to improve (NCLB, 2002, p. 2).

Both major political parties in the United States support policies that rely, in part, on choice and market-based mechanisms for improving education. The Obama administration provided market-based incentives via Race to the Top funds. Race to the Top, a federally funded grant program that began in 2010, provided $4.35 billion dollars to states, districts, and schools. The catch was that states had to compete for this money by meeting a series of requirements set forth by the administration. One requirement that states had to meet to receive funding included eliminating caps on the number of charter schools allowed in the state. This reform came along with a host of other incentives that promoted charter schools and incentivized choice-based policies at the state level (Democrats for Educational Reform, 2009). While it is too early to gage the impact of
Race to the Top, one feature that will likely increase its impact is the requirement that states, districts, and schools compete for funds. States, districts, and schools must change certain practices to be competitive for the limited amount of funding available. Those that do not actually receive funding are still likely to maintain some of the reforms that they implemented in order to compete. Thus, Race to the Top impacts schools that receive funding and those that do not (Ravitch, 2010).

Parent choice is a central component of market-based reforms in education. Pro-market supporters of school choice suggest that schools will be responsive to the needs of parents and that parents will rationally evaluate the quality of schools based on some sort of recognizable and generalizable criteria. For Chubb and Moe, this criteria was academics (1990, 71) although other researchers have found that parent searches are informed by race (Buckley & Schneider, 2007), convenience (Bell, 2007; Buckley and Schneider, 2002), school safety (Cooper, 2005; 2007), and students’ emotional needs (Couldron & Boulton, 2006). No matter what criteria parents use, if their choices are going to impact school practices through market incentives, there must be some methodological approach that parents use to conduct their school search. Otherwise there will be no identifiable improvements for schools to make in response to parent need.

There are several issues with the idea that parents will act in ways recognizable ways that provide market-based incentives to schools to change their policies and practices. First, the vast majority of parents who have the opportunity to leave “failing” schools do not actually end up moving their child (Asimov, 2003; Gupta, 2004). Moreover, Dillon points out that parents’ set of possible school choices may only include
schools that are failing or underperforming (2008). Therefore, they will end up in a failing school no matter how thoroughly they research the options in their choice set. On top of this, Christopher Lubienski has determined that schools identify ways to advertise themselves that will attract certain students over others (Lubienski, 2005; 2007). These schools are responding to market incentives, just not by increasing the quality of the education that they provide.

Perhaps the most important assumption many pro-market advocates make is that parents will be rational choosers (Chubb & Moe, 1991; School Choice Made Simple; Will, 2003; NCLB, 2002). This study provides insight into parents’ choice processes and while it is impossible to draw broad-based conclusions about the nature of parent rationality from this study, it is possible to state that parents are not purely rational in their choice process. Before outlining one key factor that impacts parent rationality—the use of conceptions of geographical place as a heuristic device in the decision making process—it is important to understand rational choice theory and the role that assumptions of parents’ ability and willingness to use rationality in their choice process plays in educational policy decisions.

*The Importance of Parents’ Rational Choice in Market-Based Educational Improvements*

School choice policies frequently rely on parents to be rational chooses. DeJarnett describes the thinking behind these policies as “the idea that parents, if empowered to choose a school, can act to maximize their preferences and improve education” (2008, p. 5). DeJarnett, drawing on Posner, describes the view of the rational actor as “choosing
the best means to the chooser’s ends” (2008, p. 6). Thus, policy makers envision parents as rational individuals who, despite whatever limitations or costs they may have to deal with along the way, will ultimately make a rational decision regarding their school choice.

Education policy at the federal and state level has increasingly turned to choice mechanisms to solve issues of school quality and equity (NCLB, 2002; Democrats for Education Reform, 2009). DeJarnatt explains that, “These tools [choice mechanisms that promote competition for educational improvement] are premised on the idea that parents are rational actors who know best what will meet the educational needs of their children” (2008, p. 4). Other advocates of school choice acknowledge that parents will need a robust amount of information in order to be rational choosers, but it is still very much possible (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

The rational choice assumption is prevalent in pro-free market ideology which is a driving force behind much educational reform in America today. The idea is clear: parents’ decisions will bring up overall school quality because “by aggregating individual preferences through innumerable voluntary exchanges, the 'invisible hand' of the free market produces economically 'efficient' levels of consumer goods and services” (Sinden, 2007, p. 540).

However, a growing body of research indicates that parents are not simply making rational decisions regarding the schools that their children attend. There are several reasons for this including race and class-based considerations (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Cooper, 2005; 2007), the construction of choice sets do not include
high-quality schools (Bell, 2005), transportation issues (Bell, 2007; Bowe, Ball, Gerwitz, 1995), the emotional wellbeing of the child (Coldron & Boulton, 2006; ), and the presence of social networks that provided “informal” “rumours” and “myths” about schools rather than atomistic, “formal” facts that can be rationally sorted, analyzed and compared (Ball & Vincent, 1997). This is in addition to bodies of research that center around parent incompetence (Henig, 1994; Asmov, 2003) and flaws in the market due to a lack of valid and available information on schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Glatter, Woods, & Bagley, 1997; DeJarnatt, 2008; Neild, 2005). Both of these issues—parent incompetence and market flaws—can prevent parents from making rational choices concerning the schools in their choice sets. To exacerbate these issues, Christopher Lubienski has identified ways in which schools of choice advertise themselves in order to attract students with specific character or demographic qualities (2005; 2007). While not precluding the possibility of rational decision making, advertisements can appeal to other faculties such as emotions and nostalgic memories, and can selectively deliver certain bits of information while hiding others. In short, there are several reasons why parents might not fully and rationally go about a thorough and valid choice process.

VI. Parents’ use of Heuristics in the School Search Process

If parents are not purely rational, lack key information, and are subject to market flaws and even manipulation, how do they actually come to the point where they are able to make a decision? Even if parents were exceptionally thorough and rational in their
information gathering, analysis, and choice process, they would never come to a point where they knew *everything* about their options. Therefore, at some point they must conclude the search process, or at least accept that they are constrained in terms of knowledge, time, and information, and make a choice based within those limitations.

Simon described this phenomenon as “Bounded Rationality” (1955; 1990), the idea that “People must operate within the constraints imposed by both their cognitive resources and the task environment…” (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008, p. 207). In order to get to the point of actually making a decision, DeJarnatt points out that “people—rather than emulating the pure rational actor of classical economic theory—use shortcuts, heuristics, and biases in their decision-making” (2008, p. 7).

People employ heuristic devices to overcome constraints on their time, knowledge, thinking capacity, and the quality of information that is available to them.

Simon described heuristics as “methods for arriving at satisfactory solutions with modest amounts of computation” (1990, p. 11). Newel and Simon described heuristics as simplified processes to replace complex algorithms (1972) while Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock defined heuristics as “efficient ways to organize and simplify. . . choices, efficient in the double sense of requiring relatively little information to execute, yet yielding dependable answers even to complex problems of choice (1991, p. 19). For the purposes of this study, “heuristics” are defined as mental strategies that simplify complex decision making processes by considering less information. Another important component of heuristics is their use as effort-reduction strategies for people who do not
have the time, resources, or know-how to gather and analyze all possible information surrounding a decision.

One primary motivator for the use of heuristics is the high cost of information gathering and processing (Simon 1957; Bartels 1996; Delli, Carpini, & Keeter, 1996). Lack of information, confusing sources of information and incomplete or partial information, coupled with parents’ cognitive limitations due to lack of experience or education, can impose limits on “cognitive resources.” Shah points out that “As the demands on limited cognitive resources increase, people may employ methods or strategies that reduce the effort they expend on computation” (2008, p. 207). Heuristics, then, provide people with mechanisms for overcoming barriers in the decision making process. It is clear that individuals can function quite well in many cases without complete information and thorough knowledge. Lupia and McCubbins (1998) identified two different types of knowledge—“encyclopedic” and “ability”—that people can employ in their decision making processes. They found that people did not need an encyclopedic, or completely thorough, knowledge of an issue to make adequate decisions. Rather, they were able to identify a few key bits of information and use them to make a decision that was generally as good as an expert’s decision making process in the same field. These few key bits of information were enough to give them the “ability” to decide. Several studies back up the idea that people can generally make good choices, especially in the public and political realm, by employing heuristic devices to help them make decisions (Lupia, 1994; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Kuklinksi & Hurley, 1994; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Schneider, et al., 1999).
The use of the term “heuristics” to explain an action associated with the decision making process exists across the spectrum of content areas and research fields ranging from political science and psychology to technological fields such as computer science (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008, p. 214-15). This has led to the need to categorize heuristic devices in ways other than their specific context and the practices associated with them. Shah, in particular, has focused on clarifying the categorizations of heuristics by placing focus on the goals behind the use of heuristics. One of these goals is the reduction of effort. This is important because a fully rational decision that takes into account all possible information and alternatives would take a considerable amount of time. Therefore, in order to understand the role of heuristics it is important to understand, at least on a theoretical level, what a full, rational decision making process might actually look like.

One model for a fully-rational decision making process is the weighted additive rule (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993). The weighted additive rule describes the decision making process in terms of the systematic examination of cues, or bits of information pertaining to a decision that need to be analyzed, and alternatives, different actions that people consider taking and must decide between during the course of the decision making process. A few examples of cues that parents might examine in the school search process are the make-up of a school’s student body, the academic performance of the school, staff member’s length of teaching experience, and the physical characteristics of the school building. Alternatives in the school search process include the different schools in parents’ choice sets, although there are other alternatives
such as when parents might attend informational meetings, how they might gather information on schools, and when they might conclude their search and make a decision.

The five steps that make up the weighted additive rule for decision making are described by Shah:

The weighted additive rule consistently requires people to expend effort on five tasks:
1. Identifying all cues—all relevant pieces of information must be acknowledged.
2. Recalling and storing cue values—the values for the pieces of information must either be recalled from memory or processed from an external source.
3. Assessing the weights of each cue—the importance of each piece of information must be determined.
4. Integrating information for all alternatives—the weighted cue values must be summed to yield an overall value or utility for the alternative. In the case of inference or judgment, this is the final step, and it produces the target judgment value.
5. All alternatives must be compared, and then the alternative with the highest value should be selected. Clearly, such an algorithm requires great mental effort; (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008, p. 207).

One key aspect of all heuristic devices is the reduction of the amount of work that is required in one or more of the five steps within the weighted additive rule. Shah explains how heuristics can be used to replace each of the five aforementioned steps of the weighted additive rule:

1. Examining fewer cues.
2. Reducing the difficulty associated with retrieving and storing cue values.
3. Simplifying the weighting principles for cues.
4. Integrating less information.

By framing the use of heuristics within the boundaries of the weighted additive rule, Shah has identified a way to categorize heuristics in a more manageable way. Instead of heuristics being categorized by specific tasks in specific situations—a practice that can
lead to the existence of thousands of different heuristics—they are instead identified by their role in reducing or replacing the decision work outlined in the weighted additive rule.

Parents who participated in this study used all five of the effort-reduction principles to simplify the weighted additive rule outlined by Shah at some point in their search process. This is not to say that all parents used all of the principles or that they intentionally employed heuristic devices in a conscious manner. Shah points out that, “We do not assume that people explicitly choose these effort reduction strategies. We argue that the heuristics people use consist of these effort-reduction principles, even if people are not consciously aware of having adopted them” (2008, p. 209). There is no clear point in the available data for this study that any parent consciously employed a heuristic device. However, their actions clearly demonstrate that they did use them in their search process.

There are three major types of heuristics that help to frame the way that people reduce the amount of effort in their decision making process. They are the availability heuristic, the representative heuristic, and the anchoring and adjustment heuristic (Buckley & Schneider, 2007, 141-46; Kahneman, Tversky, Asimov, 1982). These “types” of heuristics are defined by the actual mental processes involved in the heuristic, especially regarding the way that an individual thinks about cues involved in the decision making process. This study places a particular emphasis on how parents used the availability heuristic to make decisions regarding school choices when they did not have enough information to make a robust, fully rational decision.
The availability heuristic draws on vivid, visceral memories and emotions that stand out in the minds of decision makers (Buckley & Schneider, 2007, p. 142; Kahneman, Tversky, Asimov, 1982; Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). The availability of certain memories and emotions in an individual’s mind implies that the things being remembered happen with greater frequency or are more prevalent. Kahneman and Tversky describe availability as, “a useful clue for assessing frequency or probability, because instances of large classes are usually reached better and faster than instances of less frequent classes” although, “the reliance on availability leads to predictable biases…” (1982, p. 11). One example of the availability heuristic is the use of personal memories of a political event such as a campaign rally to reach a decision about voting. A person may not have an encyclopedic knowledge of a candidate’s positions on key policy issues but they might have one or two vivid memories, positive or negative, from the rally—a particularly rousing point in a speech or the feeling of being slighted by the candidate when they attempted and failed to get an autograph—that outweigh facts and figures about a candidate’s stances on the issues. When the person walks into the voting booth it will be easier for them to recall personal memories than specific facts and figures regarding policy. Therefore, those memories will seem to be more valid. Additionally, if the voter’s only encounter with the candidate was negative, they may assume that there are many more negative things about the candidate, based on their limited experience of them. Schwartz points out an additional key to understanding the availability heuristic is understanding the importance of visceral memories,

The availability heuristic says that we assume that the more available some piece of information is to memory, the more frequently we must have encountered it in
the past. This heuristic is partly true. In general, the frequency of experience does affect its availability to memory. But the frequency of experience is not the only thing that affects availability to memory. Salience or vividness matters as well. (Schwartz, 2005).

The second type of heuristic, the representative heuristic, is used to judge the likelihood that a person, thing, or event fits into a specific category because some quality it possesses matches that category (Buckley and Schneider, 2007, p. 142; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982, p. 4). An example of the representative heuristic might occur when guessing an individual’s occupation. If that individual is gregarious, loud, and forthright we might judge that they are a lawyer or entertainer, even if we had never communicated with them about their occupation. This is because the category of “lawyer” or “entertainer” conjures up certain mental impressions. Therefore, when someone or something exhibits characteristics that are in line with a category, people are more likely to assume they are in that category.

Finally, the Anchoring and Adjustment heuristic is used to reach decisions about quantitative values, especially monetary. Decision makers start by assigning something an initial value and then alter that value up or down as new information comes to light or as the decision maker has more time to process their thoughts (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982, p. 14-18; Nelson, 2005; Shiloh, 1994, p. 21-23). A person might use the anchoring and adjustment heuristic when buying a car. For example, they might go to the dealership believing the car they want to buy is worth $10,000. As they learn more about the car, test drive it, and talk to the dealer, they will adjust their expectations accordingly. Although, people typically move away from their initial estimate, it is vital in the process of choosing because it provides a starting point, or anchor, from which they can adjust
their expectations when new information is made available. The anchor is key because people start with a presupposed norm and any figure much higher or lower might seem abnormal, even if it is perfectly reasonable.

This study focuses primarily on how parents used the availability heuristic to limit the number of cues they need to consider within their school search decision making process. This is part of a larger effort, consciously or unconsciously, to limit the amount of effort and time required in the search process. The availability heuristic is key because parents relied on their most visceral, frequent, and available memories of experiences of the school as a geographical location. This includes visual memories of the student body, notions about the surrounding community, the physical quality of the school building, and the sense of belonging and familiarity with the school that they build as they go through the search process. In short, while some parents sought out formal information on the schools in their choice sets, they relied more on the availability of memories associated with the schools as geographical locations in order to make decisions. This study adds to previous studies on how parents use heuristic devices related to perceived school quality in order to make choices.

There is not a robust amount of research on the use of heuristic devices in the school search process but one prominent study by Schneider, Marschall, Roch, and Teske described how parents can count the number of broken windows in a school to come to a reliable conclusion on the school’s academic performance (1999). The “broken windows” theory, developed by Wilson and Kelling (1982) and Coles and Kelling (1996), is a key component of Schneider’s broken windows heuristic. The basic idea is that the number of
broken windows in a community can reliably indicate certain things about the socioeconomic status, economy, and unemployment rates in a neighborhood. Furthermore, as the number of broken windows in the neighborhood increases, citizens are more likely to break additional windows and less likely to get them fixed. Thus, the phenomenon is self-perpetuating and indicative of larger trends within the neighborhood related to attitudes about the local economy and quality of the community. Schneider describes the process:

“If windows in a factory or a shop remain broken, a passerby walks away with the idea that no one cares about the neighborhood. In turn, more windows will be broken, and the sense of disorder will intensify. In a self-propelling process, law-abiding individuals begin to avoid the area, thinking that the area is dangerous. This leaves the area open to criminals—so, in fact, the area becomes increasingly unsafe.” (Schneider, et al. 1999, p. 735).

Schneider uses the broken windows theory to relate the quality of physical properties of schools to their academic performance. He explains, “We believe that a very simple shortcut to information about school performance and school safety is available to every parent—simply by walking past a school building, an observant parent can gather information about school performance”(Schneider, et al, 1999, p. 734-35). Using interviews and observations of the physical properties of school buildings, Schneider found that the quality of the physical properties of the school and surrounding buildings correlated with the quality of academic performance of the schools’ students. In other words, schools that were more run down with broken windows, graffiti, and other physical defects were more likely to have students who consistently performed less well than those students who attended schools that were physically better off. Furthermore, parents were able to identify the correlation between the physical space and academic
performance. Schneider summed up the study, saying, “Rather than needing encyclopedic knowledge about schools to make informed choices, a simple shortcut can aid parents in choosing a school: A clean school is a good school” (1999, p. 738).

This study is similar to Schneider, Teske, Roch, and Marschall’s (1999) but asks the more general question, how do parents use heuristic devises related to schools’ geographical place in their everyday work to find a school for their child? This is related to their professed lack of information about the schools, inadequate skills to judge the differences between schools well, and limited time to work out their decision making process. Parents relied heavily on place-based geographical factors as they constructed perceptions of the schools in their choice sets. Parents in this study described visceral memories of walking into a school, meeting people associated with the school, or having some sort of experience related to the school. Despite the fact that many of the parents conducted research on potential schools, their decisions were often shaped more by the momentary impressions they got from schools’ geography of place than from a list of “official” facts about the school.

One prominent reason underlying the use of heuristics in parents’ decision making processes is the inadequate availability of information needed to make a decision. This is closely related to Shah’s focus on heuristics as time-saving and effort-reducing strategies because the part of the decision making process that takes the most time and requires the most effort is the information gathering phase. Parents who participated in this study readily acknowledged that they did have enough information to make a well-informed decision. They often acknowledged that the information was available but they
did not have the time to track it down or simply did not know where it might be located. Therefore, they turned to heuristic devices to deal with the lack of adequate information.

VII. Gaps in Parents’ Knowledge

Parents were aware that they did not have all of the necessary information to make a well-informed and fully rational decision. Although they did not use Shah’s language related to cues and alternatives, they did talk in detail about their struggles to find information (cues). They also noted that they lacked the knowledge and ability to adequately identify and compare different options within their decision making process (alternatives). Most of the parents acknowledged that there probably was helpful information somewhere but did not know where it was or how to access it. School searches can be arduous and difficult endeavors but the charter school search is additionally difficult because most charter schools are relatively new (USDE, 2011) and some schools that parents in this study considered were not yet open. Melanie expressed this frustration, explaining, “It was difficult [to find information on a charter school]. Especially if they aren’t open. It’s like, impossible to find information, you know what I mean?” (Melanie, 139-140).

Parents sought out formal and informal information to fill in their information gaps. Stephen Ball describes the difference between formal and informal information, explaining, formal knowledge is “‘Official’ knowledge . . . [it is] ‘cold’ knowledge, normally constructed specifically for public dissemination. The form it takes is abstract—

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2 Some of the schools that parents considered this will open in the 2013-14 school year. The two main schools in this study, The McKinley School and The Taft School, opened in 2007 and 2001 respectively.
examination results, lists of school activities, outlines of school policies. . .” whereas informal information is “‘hot’ knowledge, based on affective responses or direct experience” (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 380). Ball claims that informal knowledge is often disseminated through social networks between parents and their friends, co-workers, and families. He calls this the “grapevine” which is “characterized in terms of rumour” which is “most rife ‘in the absence of other, more reliable sources of information’” (Ball, 1998, 380). Parents accessed formal and informal sources of information, although they often qualified their statements about their information use by acknowledging the limited nature of the resource they were using or the fact that they did not have enough knowledge to fully use the resource in question. Throughout parents’ discussion of their use of formal and informal information, they acknowledged the sense that they were not able to access robust and complete information.

Formal information sources broke down into three general categories, none of which parents felt they could fully utilize. First, many parents searched online for information sources such as school websites or the Ohio Department of Education website. Latoya used the internet to search for information on charter schools but realized that its utility was limited by her own lack of information, saying, “As far as [the] internet, it helps me out . . . [but] you got to know about it [a specific school] to go though . . . To know what it’s about. I don’t know a lot of charter schools. If you could just get on and do research, you know?” (Latoya, 196-99). Melanie faced similar issues when she sought information online, explaining, “I don’t mind doing research on the internet but it would be nice if I knew what to search for.” (Melanie, 190-91). Parents
also viewed charter schools differently than public schools. Holly believed that the public schools’ websites were more valid sources of information, in part because they were easier to find and she knew, in advance, what she was searching out. She explained her frustration with charter school websites, saying, “Yea, but it’s not like the city schools’ websites where you can easily look up the information online to see how well they do on certain things. . . . It’s really hard to find that [on charter school websites]” (Holly, 181-83).

In one case, Holly used the internet as a last resort. She was unable to reach the school via phone and was not able to find any other information. She knew about the school because she had read about it in a newspaper article. She says:

> I looked online and I called. I really couldn’t get ahold of anybody. I guess it was the wrong time of year. Um, I had read about it in the newspaper first and then I researched it online to figure out how to go about doing it. It was just so complicated and such an unfriendly process that I just kind of gave up (Holly, 188-191).

Even when parents found official information on the internet, they did not completely trust it. Melanie understood that distilled information such as that found on school report cards might not adequately convey useful information about the schools in her choice set. She wanted a better way to rate schools that took into account more clearly important aspects of the school, especially the student body,

> because the only thing I could find was something . . . I think the state of Ohio put out? I know there are a lot of inner city kids that go to the Taft School too, and when you compare that to other kids, like the public schools, if you are comparing that against maybe, I don’t know, a private school where you would expect a 99% graduation rate or something . . . you kind of have to think about the make-up of the students too in the school and I realize that there were a lot of inner city children going to this school too and it seemed like the ratings looked good for the

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make-up of the school because a lot of kids might have been the first to go to college from their families or something (Melanie, 204-214).

The second source of formal information that parents used was school-produced physical advertisement materials such as brochures, fliers, and billboards as sources of information. Official physical sources of information typically alerted parents to the school’s existence but did not offer enough substantive information for them to make a firm decision. Shannon explained her frustration with the information found online and in a school provided brochure.

The research didn’t tell me a whole lot until I actually went in and spoke to somebody cuz what they have on the internet and the brochures that you get really don’t say a lot, so um, just like when I went over to the McKinley school, I had no idea, looking at the research, it doesn’t say a whole lot about what the McKinley School is about until you actually go and talk to somebody. So I was impressed with that but as far as research goes, it doesn’t give you a whole lot. (Shannon 122-27)

In this case, she knew about the school through the brochure but did not feel comfortable with it until she actually went and talked to someone associated with it. Shannon’s experience was indicative of most parents’ experiences in the search process. Although they believed that formal materials were a good source of information they did not use them in any sort of rational, comparative examination.

The final source of formal information was personal contact with people associated with the charter schools through informational meetings. This occurred through the informational meetings that they attended at either school. All of the parents in this study attended at least one of the informational meetings. This study does not clearly indicate the impact that not attending a meeting might have on a parent’s search process primarily because I did not talk to anyone who did not attend a meeting.
Informational meetings tended to draw parents in more because they provided a sense of familiarity with the school.

Parents tended to recall informal information more readily than formal so their use of heuristic devices typically drew on informal sources. Informal sources of information included other parents who were also in the search process. As was the case with formal informational sources, parents felt that there was valuable information to be gathered from informal sources but struggled to find it. Melanie, her husband and son were the only people who attended an information session at The Taft School. She explains:

They [presenters at the Taft School] were very personal because it was just our family and them. So it was probably a better experience than if it was a big group of people. But I missed out maybe on other people contributing questions. See, that’s one thing. I like to listen to other peoples’ questions too because sometimes it makes me think about things I’ve never thought of and get me thinking in a different way. (Melanie, 242-46)

Melanie acknowledged that there were certain things that she could not know and that other parents might have some knowledge or experience that would be beneficial to her search process. She recognized the potential for information sharing between parents who were in the process of searching for a school for their child but understood that it remained an unmet need.

Another informal source of information came through parents’ social networks. Kim had a hard time trusting the charter and magnet schools that she heard about because she had heard negative reports about charters and she was not fully aware of the distinction between charter and traditional public schools. She had only heard rumors and
occasional news stories on charter schools until someone in her social network alerted her to their presence. She explained:

“I didn’t really [know that she had the option of charter schooling for her son] (. . .) you know, one person said to me, well maybe you should look at charter schools. And my-frankly my uninformed opinion is, I hear about how many of them have been bad and um, in a way I don’t even know what a charter school is. So I don’t know, I don’t know the right answer (Kim, 305-309).

Similarly, Melanie struggled to separate the rumors she had heard about charter schools from the experiences that she had researching the Taft and McKinley Schools and attending the information sessions. She also had a contact, a father of one of her daughter’s friends, who worked at a charter school. Therefore, Melanie was forced to wade through informal information from her social network and the information that she had gathered from news stories and other rumors. She said:

I had heard about their reputations. You know, you hear good and bad things. I wasn’t sure. I was unsure about their reputation and my daughter happened to make a friend whose father is very involved in the board of several charter schools and those have been the first time I really started hearing good things about charter schools. Like, when they’re in the news, it’s rarely—its not good. Sometimes its good but you’re not going to hear it as a news flash like the bad things. (Melanie, 48-57)

Other parents had to work around their own misunderstanding of the schools that they sought out. Holly heard about the McKinley School at its sister school The Taft School but mistakenly believed it was a middle school and not an option for her daughter. Her choice set was limited by this until she found out at The Taft School informational meeting that McKinley was a high school. She explained:

[The McKinley School] might have been [a middle school] cuz I remember researching the Taft school and there was information about the McKinley School and I looked at that and I looked at the middle school. Well, maybe I got it
confused because I didn’t know there was another high school. I thought Taft was the only option in this group. You know, I understood that they were all connected but I thought Taft was the only high school. (Holly 235-40)

Holly attributed her mistake to the lack of clarity surrounding her school search, claiming, “it’s very hard to find information, you know it’s not like you can just type it in [information on the internet].” (Holly, 71-73)

Parents also identified information sources that were not available but that they believed would be helpful to them in their search. These resources were informal and formal. While many parents in this study employed heuristic devices, based on informal information, to make decisions, they claimed to want official, objective and centralized sources of information that they knew they could rely on. Melanie explained:

It’d be almost good if there was a guide in a way, you know? Like, “Have you considered this, this, and this?” and maybe it doesn’t apply but you can, you know-like frequently asked questions. Cuz think about- Someone might say something that I haven’t even thought of. You know, who knows? (Melanie 196-199)

Andressa agreed with this sentiment, claiming, “If they would have something on there like, ‘The Ten Best Charter Schools in [the city]’ or something like that. That’d probably help me out. Or somebody, [at] a 1-800 Customer Service for Charter Schools that could help you place your child in a decent charter school.” (Andressa 310-13) Disabilities also played a role in parents’ desire for a more centralized, objective source of formal information on schools. Shannon added that “If I could just put ADD schools for children with ADD and something could pop up that gives me a list, or if I put in Asperger’s or Down Syndrome or- that would be nice.”
Parents clearly understood that the information they possessed on the schools in their choice sets was not thorough. Furthermore, they acknowledged that they did not have complete choice sets because of a lack of knowledge or misinformation. Therefore, parents were forced to make decisions while fully aware of the fact that the level and quality of information they possessed on the schools in question were not adequate. Holly summed this up, describing her decision making process when she chose a charter elementary school for her daughter, she admitted, “I didn’t have a lot to go on but faith that it was going to work out” (Holly, 371-72). In order to make a decision, these parents had to rely on heuristics to overcome the limited amount of information, lack of time, and high level of confusion involved in their decision making processes.

VIII. Space and Place—How does Geography Impact Parents’ Search Process?

Parents in this study used heuristics throughout their search process. One fundamental component in their school search process was the bits of information—cues—they considered along the way. These cues were multifaceted in nature and included information from a wide variety of sources. The geographical aspects of the schools in their choice set was one significant source of information related to parents’ search process and the most significant area in which they employed heuristic devices. My attention was initially drawn to geography through the work of Doreen Massey which is outlined below. Massey’s work provided me with a frame with which to examine parents’ work to interact with geographical aspects of the school selection process.
Every parent used geographical information pertaining to the school at some point in their search process. This geographical information broke down into two types: geographical space and geographical place. For the purposes of this study, by “space” I am referring to the physical distance between two points, typically parents’ home or work and their child’s school that can be impacted by temporal, social, and economic components. By “place” I am referring to a physically fixed point with a socially derived meaning that changes over time and can mean different things to different people. This point is often fixed in the minds of people who gather around it, interact around and within it, and make plans associated with it. But there are many political, economic, and social factors that change the way that people perceive space and place over time (Massey, 1994).

The geographical space between parents’ home or work and the charter schools they might choose for their child is a consideration that many parents must make in their decision making process. It is tempting for researchers and policy makers to focus solely on distance (space) when analyzing the geographical aspects of school choice policies and practices. However, physical locations (place) play a very important role in the way that people charter schools and make decisions regarding school choice. Both space and place are dynamic, socially constructed, and change over time. They also significantly impact parents’ school search process as parents must navigate space as they work to get their child to a school every day and as they view the school as a place that has meaning which will impact their decision to either enroll their child or look at other educational options. While much school choice policy envisions geographical considerations strictly
in measurable and observable spatial grids, it is clear that geography has an element of “place” in it along with an element of “space” (Bell, 2007; 2009; Massey, 1994).

Courtney Bell explains the concept of geographical space, saying “Location is measured in units such as miles, driving time, and convenience to other important locations (relatives’ homes, jobs, day care, etc.). These locations and connections can easily be placed on a map, calculated, and compared by a researcher” (2007, p. 378).

Space is a very real issue with very real consequences, especially for parents who do not possess adequate means of transportation because they do not have access to a personal vehicle, satisfactory public transportation, or the social connections to help them with transportation (Bell, 2007; 2009; Ball, Bowe, Gewirtz, 1995; Massey, 1994). Space is also of primary importance to parents’ understanding of schools as “convenient” or “inconvenient.” If a school is conveniently located it is much more likely that a parent will choose it over another, even if the other school is academically superior (Hastings, et al., 2005; Theobald, 2005). However, Bell goes on to explain, “A singular focus on spatial dimensions also over-simplifies and decontextualizes, thereby assigning the individual making the decision a somewhat peripheral role in the choice [school search] process” (2007, p. 378). The meaning of geographical space in parental school choices, then, needs to be conceptualized more deeply than just the physical distance between two locations.

Doreen Massey explains the importance of thinking about space in terms of “space-time,” explaining, “space must be conceptualized integrally with time; indeed the aim should be to think always in terms of space-time. . . . social relations are never still;
they are inherently dynamic” (1994, p. 2). Space, then, is not a static thing. It changes over time as individuals and societies alter it. Space is changed over time because society is in a constant state of “making changes,” many of which alter the physical characteristics of space. This can have a profound impact on the way that individuals interact in and navigate through space. For example, as the economy of a city changes, traffic patterns to and from places of work change as well. As traffic patterns change, roads must be added or altered to accommodate new transportation needs. Inevitably, this alters the way that individuals get to and from work and the composition of communities as roads are built around or through them. Space also requires time. Parents’ interview data outlined below suggests that parents thought about the time it would take to navigate the space between their home or work and their child’s school more than they thought about the distance in terms of miles that they would have to cover.

Massey also points out the importance of viewing “space-time as a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity. . . . social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, [therefore] this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (1994, p. 3). Rather than one “space” there are multiple “spaces,” each of them constructed by multiple factors and perceived in different ways by the individuals who encounter them. Parents must navigate multiple “spaces” that interlay over one another as they complete the work associated with getting their child to school. Power and meaning become significant factors in the construction of space as well. This is evidenced by district boundaries along
lines of economic differences, limitations in public transportation circuits and the way that streets and roads are constructed through some communities but around others.

How do Charter Schools Locate Themselves? Geographical Considerations in Parents’ Decision Making

Geographical considerations played a major role in parents’ search processes. A growing body of research supports the notion that parents choose schools that are geographically convenient both in terms of the physical distance between their homes, jobs or other children’s schools and the charter school in question, and in terms of the time that it takes to get from one place to another when dropping their child off at school or putting them on the bus to school (Kleitz et al., 2000, p. 853; Andre Bechely, 2007; Bell, 2007; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Hamilton & Guin, 2005; Hastings, et al. 2005; Henig & MacDonald, 2002). In short, many parents simply do not have the time, money or will to send their child to a school that is not geographically convenient, even if that school is academically excellent. This is not to suggest that all parents are bounded by convenience. Convenience does not automatically trump other considerations for parents such as academic quality, safety, and school mission (Bell, 2009; Cooper, 2005) but it does severely limit parents’ choice sets.

Charter schools’ patterns of locating themselves can exacerbate the difficulty of traveling to school for some parents. Courtney Bell highlights the problem of school location and the importance of developing research on parents’ geographical preferences by contrasting schools with commercial products or services that must compete for consumers. One key difference is that consumer products are almost always strategically
located in an identifiable, logical, and predetermined area within a grocery store, mall, or zoned space. However, schools must intentionally spread themselves out in order to serve all students. She explains,

Unlike cereal brands that sit side by side in a single grocery store or health care providers that often try to be conveniently located, schools are deliberately spread out as a result of their history serving neighborhood communities. Thus, geographic preferences are particularly worthy of study due to their potentially unique role in parents’ decisions” (Bell, 2007, p. 376-77).

Traditional Schools are strategically located in relation to one another based on the needs of their communities (Cremin, 1976). Charter schools are strategically located as well but their location can be bound by factors outside of the immediate consideration of those who start the school.

There are several factors that contribute the charter school location. First, charters are less likely to locate in an area that is already oversaturated with other charter or magnet schools, or if there is a very strong traditional public school nearby (Glomm, Harris, & Lo, 2005). Charter school location can also be dictated, in part, by the market for charter school options in a given area. Henig and MacDonald found that “As the need-based market model predicts, charters are more likely to locate where existing public schools are performing badly and they are more likely to cluster in high-minority areas than in those populated largely by whites” (2002, p. 977). Charter school growth appears to be bounded by the lack of demand for other educational options in white, middle-class areas with schools that are typically deemed successful or passing (NAPCS).
Second, charter schools, like other organizations that require physical space, may only choose from building spaces that are available for lease, rent or purchase. If a particular location is already occupied or costs too much for the school organization to cover, it is highly unlikely that they will locate there. Furthermore, many charters in the state in which the Taft and McKinley Schools are located are housed in school buildings that the large city school systems sold or leased to them (Available Charter Facilities, 2012). Sharing school buildings has led to tension between charter schools and traditional public schools as they struggle for rights to buildings that are not in use, making it even more difficult for charter schools to strategically locate themselves (Smith, 2012). Nevertheless, this trend of co-opting out-of-use traditional buildings increases the likelihood that charter schools will locate themselves in geographical patterns that are similar to those already established by traditional schools.

Finally, charter type can dictate the areas in which the charter school might locate. Henig points out that charter schools are not monolithic in nature. They vary greatly in terms of practices, goals and organizational structures. While there is no right way to categorize charter schools, Henig generally breaks them into two categories: “market” oriented schools and “mission” oriented schools. Market-oriented schools are typically for-profit, focused on the student as consumer, and driven by efficiency and standards. Mission-oriented schools are not-for-profit, altruistic, and often focused on the social and democratic aspects of education over standards and efficiency (Henig, et al., 2005). Henig and MacDonald point out that “Compared to mission-oriented schools, market-oriented charters seem more likely to locate in or near tracts with high [home] ownership
and less likely to locate near heavy concentrations of Hispanics” (2002, p. 975).

Therefore, certain students are more likely to be exposed and have access to one charter school type over the other.

Both schools in this study are “mission” oriented schools. This is especially important when considering the location of the Taft School. One of its primary missions is to provide early college opportunities for its students by partnering with a local private liberal arts college. In order to facilitate this partnership, The Taft School had to locate itself within a safe and reasonable walking distance of the college so students can travel from the school to the college. However, this location is not a “strategic” location in the sense that it is conveniently located near residential zones that would provide a large population of high school age students who might consider the school for its geographical proximity (Information Meeting Observation).

An understanding of the state’s funding scheme for public schools is key to understanding building location patterns. Historically, schools in Ohio are funded through local property taxes. This creates a gap between schools located in poorer districts and those located in wealthier districts. Parents who belong to a privileged race or social class—typically white and middle class—are more likely to live in a district which benefits from the state’s funding scheme (Epstein, 2011). Even in schools of choice such as charter and magnet schools, middle class white parents are able to “navigate” the school choice process in ways that benefit their child over other children and ensures that they will have a better chance of getting into their preferred schools (Andre Bechely,
1999; 2005). Additionally, certain parents “choose” their child’s school by moving into a wealthier district that typically will contain better-performing schools (Holmes, 2002).

How does Geography of Space Impact Parents’ School Choice Process?

Parents’ space-based geographical considerations played an important role in their school search process. Parents’ choices were impacted by several issues as considered what it would be like to navigate the space between their homes or work and the schools in their choice set. These problems issues included temporal boundaries, social constraints, and economic limitations. Each of these things limited the schools that parents could realistically consider.

Parents had to consider how time constraints limited the schools they could realistically consider. If parents had to drop their child off during rush hour, their choice sets might be more limited than if they had to drop their child off for school at a time when traffic was less congested. Also, parents needed to consider other temporal factors such as when they must be at work or how long they will be away before they can pick their child up at the end of the day. Even if they were able to acquire child care, temporality plays a role because they may need to pay childcare providers by the hour, limiting the amount of time they can be at work beyond the end of the school day.

Next, parents had to consider socially constructed aspects of space. Examples of social aspects of space include the construction and lay out of city streets, zoning issues that place neighborhoods far away from schools, and considerations about the family and parent/child relationship that may be harmed if children are on the bus to school for
several hours a day. Another key social component that impacted parents’ spatial geographic preferences was the presence of friends or family who could help them financially or with rides for their children. Parents with robust social networks gained the needed social capital to successfully cover larger distances. This, in turn, had the potential to expand the set of schools from which they could choose.

Finally, economic concerns influenced parents’ considerations of space-based geographical issues. Parents had to budget money for gas if they drove their children to school every day. Also, Parents need to work stems from certain economic imperatives. Parents structured their day around working because they had to meet the economic needs associated with providing for their families. This impacted the way that they negotiated the school search process and got their child to school. Work presented social and temporal issues as well. Parents had to get to work on time so were forced to drop their child off at a certain time of morning, often whether it was convenient or not. Furthermore, parents’ place of work presented economic issues because they may not be able to afford the additional transportation costs required to drop their child off at a school that was not conveniently located near their home or work.

It is important to note the way that parents understood space had little to do with the measurable physical distance between their homes or work and school. Rather, these physical distances gained their significance from the temporal, social, and economic factors that impacted the way that parents navigated space (Massey, 1994). The temporal, social and economic factors listed above significantly altered parents’ ability to choose certain schools and impacted the amount and type of work that they had to do in order to
get their children to a school. While the three constraints listed above—temporal, social, and economic—had a profound impact on the schools that parents could consider, parents identified several other space-based considerations that they made in their search process.

**Quality of Life.** Parents considered their own quality of life and the quality of life of their children when navigating space-based considerations. Schools’ schedules and parents’ work schedules rarely lined up in such a way that parents could drop their children off, go to work, and then pick their children back up after school without forcing the student to wait for a significant amount of time before being picked up. Many parents saw this as a quality of life issue because they saw no value in the student spending a significant amount of time at the school before and after classes or on the bus. Paula explained,

I didn’t want to put him on the bus, you know I was like “We only have a few minutes in the morning” between when he wakes up, get him fed, get him dressed and all that stuff, you know I don’t really want to put him on a bus when he’ll be on a bus for an hour, half hour, whatever. Why should he spend more time with the bus driver than he spends with me? (Paula 22-26)

In addition to losing quality time with their children, parents saw the unsupervised time as a potential safety issue. Melanie decided to allow her mother to homeschool her son beginning in kindergarten because of the time he would have spent home alone if he went to a public school. He also would have needed expensive preschool and after school care that Melanie and her husband could not afford. She said, “I think the main reason that we, at first we didn’t want to do the public school was we would have had to find preschool care and after school care and I didn’t really want them getting off the bus and being home alone until we got home.” (Melanie 31-35)
Student Disabilities. Parents also had to consider their children’s disabilities or special needs as they thought about how they might get them to school each morning. Kathy’s son Dylan struggled to wake up and get ready for school each morning. She claimed that, “with his ADHD he just needs more time. He has to have more time to figure out what he needs, what to take to class. He just needs, even 5-10 minutes to get out of the car. Because his meds aren’t kicked in yet and if you rush him it just sets his whole day off.” [Kathy, 377-81] Kathy liked the Taft School because it did not take long for her to get there in the morning. She ruled out other options because the longer distance meant they would have to get up earlier to accommodate the drive time and Dylan’s extended morning routine. Despite Taft’s early start time, Kathy claimed that, “The Taft School is a 7:30 school too, but, we can leave in 10 minutes and it would just be a lot better.” (Kathy 391-92) Shannon had a very similar experience in getting her son, who had been diagnosed with ADHD as well, to school on time. She originally placed him in a traditional public school but opted for a charter school, Glenoak Academy, when, “it just got to be a little hectic in the morning trying to get him there [traditional city school]. So we just decided ‘Glenoak is less than 2 miles, so we’ll just put you back in there.’”

Students’ Social Lives. Children’s social lives outside of school were connected to space-based considerations in parents’ search process. Kathy wanted to choose a school that was close to home in order for her son to hang out with his friends outside of school hours. One of the schools in her choice set was just too far for her to let him drive
by himself. She also thought about how his ADHD would impact his ability to drive, saying,

in high school they start driving themselves and I’m sitting there thinking, do I really want my ADHD child behind the wheel, on highways, at all hours of the night so that he can have a social life with his friends? Maybe this is the time to move him a little closer to home where it’s more practical. (Kathy, 414-17)

Shannon initially found out about the McKinley School through her son’s friends who went there. Like Kathy, she considered how her son’s social time would be impacted by the distance between her home and the school.

**District Boundaries.** Parents’ made space-based geographical considerations when they thought about how their choice sets were limited by district boundaries. Parents’ choices were limited when their preferred schools fell in different districts. Paula wanted to send her son to a specific traditional public high school in a different part of town but was unable to because she lived outside of the district lines for the school. She explained, “My Address prevents me from getting into some schools. . . . So I’m not south enough and I’m not east enough. But I’m like right there by the hospital [down town]. So I could never get a child into Rogers [High School] or Crestview [High School].” (Paula 62-65)

Kim also considered moving out of her traditional public school district in order to access public schools that she believed would better address her son’s needs associated with his disabilities. However, she ultimately felt that her family’s emotional needs outweighed the need to move to another district, explaining, “We were thinking about moving if we could find a different school district. But my 11 year old is horrified by that
so I started just asking around about all different schools and people were saying this school and that school, but they were all schools where you had to live in the district.” (Kim 125-29). The geography of space in these cases is not a matter of distance but a matter of socially constructed locations—the parents live in a community or neighborhood that is outside of the district lines of the schools that they want their children to attend.

**Convenience Through Proximity.** Parents were able to select certain schools because of their proximity to home or work, or because they were located near a bus line that their children could ride to get to a school. Melanie considered two charter schools—The Taft School and another unnamed school that was not yet open but she believed would be open by the next school year. Both of these schools were viable options because she passed them on her way to work. She found out about both of these schools through her social networks and was able to find out about their locations through the people she knew. She explained,

> I work downtown. And the university [Affiliated with The Taft School] is kind of on the way. So that would be an option because we won’t have bus service because we are [in the suburbs] outside of the City school district. And I was working out transportation and . . . he [a friend] was telling me that it [the other charter school] would be located downtown. That’s two streets away from where I would work. I was like, ‘Oh, now that’s really even more appealing to me!’ In that sense, that is appealing to me. (Melanie 140-48)

Melanie’s approach to considerations of geographical space is framed here in two socially constructed ways. First, her work is near both of the schools that she considered so she has greater access to the school because she’ll be around it already. Second, her social network, in this case her friend, gave her access to knowledge about a school that
was not yet open and that she would not have considered otherwise. In this sense, her social network acted to expand her choice set.

It is clear that space-based considerations impacted parents’ decisions. However, another geographical factor—place—played a significant role in parents’ decision making process. Space-based considerations did more to construct parents’ choice sets by making certain schools possible and others not. Place-based geographical issues required parents to consider characteristics of schools that they were actively considering. This is where parents most deeply employed heuristic devices as they learned about the schools in their choice sets as geographical places.

How does the Geography of Place Impact Parents’ Search Process?

The geography of place, explains Courtney Bell, “encompasses the meanings people assign to particular locations” and “a place’s history, peoples, and purposes within the political, social, and economic landscape that influence the types of meanings individuals associate with that place” (2007, p. 378). It would be easy to assign meaning to a place based exclusively on its spatial dimensions that can be placed on a map, measured and compared. But places take on a range of complicated meanings for different people and can change significantly over time (Massey, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991). Individuals and groups are also impacted significantly by places. Andre Bechely explains that “Places are constructed through social processes and, so too, social relations are constructed in and through place” (2007, p. 1358). Schools are good examples of geographical “places” in the sense that Massey uses the term. For example, they are
constructed by their student body which changes significantly over time. They are also impacted by outside forces at the local, state, national, and even international levels. Furthermore, the meanings, practices, and goals of the school as a cultural, social, educational, economic, and political institution change over time as the perceived needs of individuals and society change as well. Schools, then, are dynamic, changing things with multiple meanings. These changes, as Massey points out, are likely to have a significant impact those individuals—students, teachers, parents, administrators, community members, etc.—who interact with one another within the institution of the school.

The idea of place as a socially constructed, continually-changing but still singular location can be confusing. Massey explains that “The singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location (their partly happenstance juxtaposition) will in turn produce new social effects” (Massey, 1994, p. 168). Places are given meaning based on the processes that occur in and around them and the people and groups who participate in, organize, and drive those processes. As people and organizations change and as the types of processes that occur within and around a place change, the meaning that a certain place has for individuals and society will change too.

Massey points out that the idea that place is fixed and unchanging is derived from the mistaken idea that space is fixed too. She says of this mistake, “It is a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic
in its identity. It is a conceptualization of place which rests in part on the view of space as stasis” (Massey, 1994, p. 5). On the other hand, Massey points out that place can be envisioned more accurately when researchers begin with a robust view of space. She explains,

If, however, the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interrelations at all scales, then one view of a place is as a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings….The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through the counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that ‘beyond’. Places viewed this way are open and porous (1994, p. 5).

The parents who participated in this study viewed place in this manner. Their views of the schools in their choice sets as places were constantly changing and influenced by forces within and outside of the school. Furthermore, parents’ previous experiences, particularly those related to other schools, and information derived from friends, family, and acquaintances on their social networks, impacted the way they viewed the schools in their choice sets as geographical places. It is therefore clear that schools and other “places” are dynamic, shifting, tangled webs of personal, social, and institutional interactions that profoundly impact the individuals who learn and work within them. This is why heuristics become very useful to parents in the midst of their school search. The shifting, dynamic nature of schools as geographical places, coupled with parents’ lack of complete and reliable information, means that parents will inevitably be confused by all the things they need to think about. Heuristics offer them a vital way to get around the task of sorting through all of the information they encounter.
IX. How did Parents Use Place-Based Geographical Considerations as Heuristic Devices? Five Parent Cases Examined

There are several ways that parents who participated in this study viewed schools as “places.” Parents cited several aspects of the schools in their choice sets that contributed to their understanding of the schools as places. Generally, these aspects included the student body, the physical building, the surrounding community, and parents’ interactions with school personnel. Parents experienced these four aspects in three main ways: through personal interactions, formal informational materials, or through their social networks. I will provide the accounts of five parents who used place-based geographical considerations as heuristic devices. Then, I will explain how parents came to understand the four aspects of place listed above and how they experienced those aspects. Table 2 details each of the four aspects of schools that contributed to parents’ understanding of the schools as geographical places and the three ways that they experienced these aspects.

Some parents considered place-based geographical considerations more than others and each parent used them differently throughout their search process. No parent used considerations of the geographical place of the school exclusively in their search process but the considerations of place often outweighed other factors such as academic quality. Each of the following five cases presents individual parents’ use of the geography of place as an availability heuristic device in their school search process. Parent demographic data is provided, although the sample size is not large enough to draw conclusions about the role of socioeconomic status, race, or income on the search process.
Latoya

Latoya, a lower-income, single African American mother of three school-aged students, explained her daughter’s orientation at The McKinley School, saying, “Its friendly—they told us how the school ran, about the school day and one of the secretaries that we had to get in contact with. Told us about the transportation” (Latoya, 90-91).

Latoya appreciated the information that the administration provided at the meeting but it was the manner of delivery that stood out to her and ultimately helped her in her decision process. She was also struck by her experience at an ice cream social that the school held for new and returning students. Responding to my question about whether her daughter wanted to leave her traditional public school, Latoya explained, “She is happy. We went to the ice cream social [at McKinley] and I asked if she liked it and she said, ‘sure.’ She wants to try it” (Latoya, 143-44). She also described her experience of the students at the school, saying, “They seemed happy, excited. Hollering for the teachers when they were introduced at the thing [the ice cream social] . . . It seemed like they were really happy. They liked it” (Latoya, 229-30).

The experience at The McKinley School contrasted with Latoya’s experience at her daughter’s previous school where they “just kind of pushed her through . . . they didn’t take a lot of time with her” (Latoya, 25-27).

Because of her previous negative experience, the positive, though temporary, experience at The McKinley School stood out more than formal information about the school. Latoya did not mention, at any point, the grades, test scores, or academic qualities of the school.

Another aspect of the school as a geographical, socially constructed place that appealed to Latoya was the size. She referred to her experience as a student and her
daughter’s previous school to explain her idea of a typical school. These experiences led her to believe that a “standard” high school (i.e.; large, urban, traditional public school) was large and impersonal. The McKinley School stood in stark contrast to this. Latoya explained,

It was small. It wasn’t on a high school standard. You know—[there were no] lockers. You know, I don’t think some kids do well [at large schools] but she’s been in a setting like that for years. You know, with the lockers and the classes and the changing of the classes and having to get to class but I think a smaller school like that- I think she’ll do real fine. Not pressure to be on time- You know. You gotta be on time so going to your locker and fiddling with her locker combination (Latoya 124-28).

Latoya’s experience of the school as “small” led her to believe that her daughter would be successful because the environment was conducive to her specific academic needs. She used her experiences of the school building as a heuristic device—it was small and did not have room for lockers for the students—to draw conclusions about the quality of the education that her daughter would receive. Latoya did not cite specifics figures such as average class size or other formal measurements of academic quality. Instead, she relied on the visceral experience of seeing that there were no lockers and the building was small.

Latoya employed the availability heuristic as she recalled certain visceral memories—feeling slighted at her daughter’s previous school, engaging in an ice cream social at The McKinley School, seeing the current students at The McKinley School cheer for the teachers, and her observation of the physical size of the school—that ultimately meant more to her than facts and figures about the schools’ academic records, curriculum, or the length of teachers’ experience in the field.
Kim

Kim, a white middle-class mother of four children between the ages of 11 and 21, focused on the social aspects of the schools that she considered in her search process. Her son, Allen, was a ninth grader who had been to two different schools, a small public school in a well-to-do urban area, and a larger magnet school, Meadow Park Magnet School, that was affiliated with the public city school system. Kim chose The McKinley School because she felt that it was the best social fit for her son. Allen struggled with emotional health issues which contributed to his frequent moves. Kim perceived each school in her choice set as a unique geographical place based on her perception of the student body and teachers, and, specifically, how they interacted with her son. Kim’s perception of these schools as geographical places changed over time, in line with Massey’s view of place as changing over time (1994).

Kim initially enrolled her son in Meadow Park Magnet School when they were selected through the lottery. She was not sure that she wanted to go to that school until her son met some of the teachers at the magnet school. She explained his reaction, so we went, and, there was like the big classroom orientation with the power point and stuff, but then you sat down at a table with a couple of teachers and, um, Allen really liked that. And they said, ‘you know, here is the form, if you know you wanna come you can sign it now and if you don’t know you, you can take it home and you have 3 days to make up your mind.’ You know? And he said, ‘I want to come, I want to sign it now’ (Kim, 40-44).

Kim began to develop a sense of the magnet school as a geographical place when she and her son encountered the teachers in a personal setting. She heard good things about the school through her social network of friends who tried to enroll their children in the same
school but she and her son were not sold until they had a personal interaction with the staff at the school.

Over time, however, her son began to have negative experiences with the social aspects of Central City. He enrolled in the school as a sophomore in high school and had a difficult time making friends. Kim’s explained why they ultimately left the school, saying,

My son is a very social young man. Socializing is very important to him. And . . . there was a group of people who were just not his social match. You know, they were playing Pokemon cards at lunch. And, he was like ‘Oh my gosh, I played Pokemon in 3rd grade.’ So it was hard for him to find a clique. He ended up, there was a group of kids from a large church in town that go there [Central City]. So he ended up that sort of being his friend group, and, um, he started to get involved in the church because they put a lot of pressure on him to do that [attend the church] um, and, some uncomfortable incidents happened with the church with some boys um, advances that he was really uncomfortable with. So over the holiday break, he um, just said, I don’t want to go back there, I don’t want to go back there, I don’t want to go back there.

Kim’s view of Meadow Park changed as her son encountered other students, first, with friends who he did not connect with well, and, second, with friends who he felt pressured by to attend a church. Her son faced additional mental and emotional health issues and Kim enrolled back into their traditional public school in January, 2012. At the time of our interview in June 2012, Kim had decided to enroll her son in The McKinley School which she found out about through a friend. She agreed to check out the school because she trusted the information gained through contacts in her social network more than she trusted the formal information she had read. Both schools that she was dissatisfied with, Meadow Park Magnet School and her son’s tradition public option, had very high academic ratings and were generally considered to be two of the better high schools in
the area (ODE, 2012b). However, Kim ultimately relied on a heuristic device regarding her perception of the McKinley School as a geographical place in order to finalize her decision about where to send her son.

The McKinley School displayed posters in the hallway outside of the room where the informational meetings took place. Kim describes how she was able to compare the student body at McKinley to the student body at Central City, in part by viewing pictures that McKinley provided of its students and recalling her memories of the negative experiences her son had at Meadow Park. She said,

And so I felt like, OK so they are- if we can get things worked out [at McKinley] there are a group of kids who . . . excel academically and . . . there are a really wide range of kids. And so, hopefully, for him its going to be all about social connections. . . . This is sort of an obnoxious thing to say. I’m looking at all the pictures [of students who attend the McKinley School] and I’m going, ‘Ok, if he walks in there and these are the people that he’s going to see, is he going to feel, you know, when he walked in Meadow Park Magnet School . . . it looked like Geek City. You know . . . - I just looked at the pictures and said, this just looks more normal.’ (Kim, 217-25)

Kim used the images of students at The McKinley School as a heuristic device in her decision making process. She was unsure of the academic quality of the McKinley School, which is rated lower by the State of Ohio than Meadow Park and her son’s traditional public school (ODE, 2012b). However, she believed that her son would fit in better with the student body at The McKinley School because she recalled her memories of the student body at Meadow Park and compared them to her perception of the students at McKinley. Kim employed the availability heuristic based only on her limited experience of the students at McKinley via school-produced materials. However, her
limited experience played a greater role in Kim’s decision making process than formal information about the schools in her choice set.

Kathy

Kathy, a white, upper-middle class mother of one child, worked very hard to ensure that her son would be “safe” at whatever school she ultimately chose for him. This is consistent with other studies that show that parents’ perceptions of a place are wrapped up in notions of safety for their children (Armour & Peiser, 1997; Bell, 2007; 2009 Cooper, 2007; Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Kathy considered several aspects of the geography of place of the schools in her choice set as she navigated the school search process. Although her considerations varied—she considered the student body, experiences with school personnel, and school size among other things—her central focus was the safety of her son, Dylan. Ultimately, Kathy’s search for a school was more about finding a safe place for her son to attend school than it was about academics or anything else.

Kathy’s son, Dylan, went to a small private evangelical Christian school between kindergarten and eighth grade. However, his school did not offer a high school so Kathy was forced to find another schooling option. This presented her with a choice: follow the traditional school path to a large, urban public high school called Brookestone High School, or seek out another option from among the city’s charter and magnet schools. She also considered but could not afford private options. Kathy drew a lot from her experiences at Brookestone High School and The Taft School. She described her experience of walking into Brookestone in order to get a form signed so she could enroll
her son in the lottery for magnet schools (see p. 1). Kathy’s initial impression of the school came from her interaction through her work with several of the students who attended the school she said, “I’ve never heard anything good about it [Brookestone] Um, I work with [a Christian youth organization], at the East Side club so a lot of the kids in the club go to Brookstone High School, and, boy there’s some really distressed families that are in that school” (Kathy 102-03). At that point she was still considering enrolling Dylan at Brookestone but changed her mind after they walked through the halls of the school on her way to pick up a form for the lottery. She explained her experience, saying,

when we wanted to put Dylan in the lottery for the city schools, you have to be enrolled in your local [public] school to do that. So, we, Dylan and I went over and enrolled him, and . . . Dylan was very intimidated and very scared. He’s very little and everybody was so adult. They were all so grown up, there was a lot of attitude in the school. Which, you know didn’t surprise me because I know a lot of those kids. And, um, that was intimidating for him. The attitude was very scary. (Kathy, 104-09)

She went on to explain how she came to her conclusions about whether her son should go to Brookestone,

We didn’t really talk to many of the teachers or go on a tour at Brookstone High School. It was just totally our initial impression of walking through the door, walking down to the library, talking to one person . . . . We really only saw the students in the halls as we were walking through. And that’s it. So I don’t really know much, except what I know about the students that I know there. (Kathy, 214-18).

Kathy’s impression of Brookestone was also formed by her ideas about “big” “city” schools in general. She said,

Well, the scariest thing about going to a city school is that they’re all big, and I am positive that my kid would fall through the cracks in the midst of a crowd like that. I’m very nervous about him being there on his own. . . . while he has an amazingly high IQ, functionally and socially he is probably 3 years behind other kids his age, and, um. . . I don’t, you know, want to paint him to be a sissy or
something, but he does not transition well and he needs someone to help him through, especially in the beginning until he gets used to things (Kathy, 246-51). Kathy had already formed opinions about “city schools” as geographical places and used those opinions as heuristic devices. In particular, she concluded, based on her experience, that Brookestone would be too big to give her son the attention he needed. Also, she expected that the school’s size would prohibit the kind of personal attention that her son would need to succeed and that would prevent him from getting bullied by other students.

Kathy used place-based geographical considerations at The Taft School as well, although she came to different conclusions. This time she found that her temporary experiences and impressions attracted her to the school. Again, she did not rationally compare the two schools at any point by looking at grades, statistics, or educational outcomes. She had the same level of exposure to The Taft School as she did to Brookestone, however she felt that several things were different. First, the student body seemed to be more close-knit and friendly. She described her impression of the students as she arrived for an informational meeting,

the student body there [The Taft School] is just knit together, they are so close. Their friendships are so good. And I just, I didn’t worry about him getting picked on at that school. Um, and I really liked the kids that I’ve met there so far. Even yesterday, whenever we went over, one of the kids who was out at the sidewalk ran over and opened the door us. I said, I’ve never seen this at a public school. (Kathy, 392-96)

Kathy did not have exhaustive experiences at The Taft School. Her impressions about the students were formed simply by walking through the school, having the door opened for her by a student, and observing the student body as they interacted with each other. However, this momentary impression had a substantial impact on her decision making.
process because she was able to remember her impression of both student bodies and compare those two memories to one another.

Kathy also gained a sense of familiarity with The Taft School as a geographical place when she and Dylan interviewed with an administrator from the school. She said that her son was scared of going to the open house where the interview took place, but “It was very exciting and encouraging. And Dylan felt very encouraged. When we went to the open house he was . . . scared cuz he’s never been there. He was like that at every open house we’ve been to” (Kathy, 304-06). Kathy also felt a sense of familiarity and belonging at The Taft School because of a conversation she had with a dean at the school, she [A Dean at the school] was just very motivating, excited to see the classes that he’s in now, that he’ll be able to transfer three classes from his school now, and start in Spanish II, start in geometry, start in biology, so she was talking to him in Spanish, See where he was in Spanish because she teachings that I guess. So she asked him what he was doing in Spanish and he said it was verb tenses, so she started talking to him and he was able to translate everything that she said. So, they were both excited about that, and, um, it was a really good experience. She was talking about her son having ADHD, some of the things that she encounters, asking Dylan if he encountered some of those difficulties. Just very reassuring that she would be able to work with him and help him along and help him excel, despite that. Very willing. . . . she was very helpful and said she would help him every step of the way, if that’s what we wanted. . . . And she said, Dylan, if you want to come here I will make a place for you and just encouraged him musically and stuff too. So, it was good. (Kathy, 310-35).

While Kathy and her son discussed formal things such as his class schedule and credit transfers the thing that stuck out to her was the personal interaction, feeling of connectivity, and familiarity that she achieved with the dean from The Taft School. Her memory of this conversation was more about the feeling that she took away from the conversation than it was about the actual information that she gained.
Kathy used the availability heuristic in her school search process—to help her decide against Brookestone and to help her decide to enroll her son at The Taft School. She recalled “available” visceral memories about the student body, meetings with administrators and the size of the schools in her choice set. The anxiety she felt for her son and her experiences working with students from “distressed” families outweighed formal information that would have helped her make a rational decision about the school. Her visceral memories trumped things like the schools’ academic records and even stats about school safety. It was the sense of familiarity, personal attention, and her son finding a good social fit that drew Kathy to The Taft School.

_Holly_

Holly shared Kathy’s concern about school safety. She contrasted her concern that her daughter would struggle with “fitting in” and being “very small for her age” at the traditional public high school they would have attended if they did not choose a charter or magnet option with her more positive experiences at The McKinley School. Holly felt that the traditional public school was much too big and her daughter, Ann, would not do well there, primarily because she would be overlooked by teachers and picked on by students. She described their experience of walking into the traditional school for a tour, saying,

> At the [traditional] city school she was very shy and intimidated and quite because it overwhelmed her. And looking at the other students, she told me she felt like she just didn’t fit it. Because one of the issues with Ann is that she is very small for her age. So she was very concerned about going to high school and not fitting in because she’s so small (Holly, 280-84).
Holly contrasted their experiences at the traditional school with their experiences at The McKinley School. Although they had essentially the same amount of time and the same level of exposure to the school and student body, they had a different impression of McKinley. Holly explained, “[Ann] felt that at McKinley there’s more people and she would be accepted, that there’s not the cliques that there usually is in high school and she didn’t feel like she had to please someone else to try to fit in. She could just go there and be her and that would be her and that would be fine.

Holly initially found out about The McKinley School from a cousin who worked as a teacher there. She described how she was “pretty much sold from when my cousin was talking about it” (244-46). The fact that her cousin worked at the school also helped Holly deal with space-based geographical issues. She recalled a conversation she had with her daughter about how they would get her to The McKinley School which was inconveniently located across town. She explained,

There are bussing options. The City School would bus but fortunately my cousin lives just down the street from us, so he’s going to pick her up and take her to school for us, so that’s- he’s literally just on the way. And I said, ‘Ah, that’s no problem!’ Ann felt a little weird about it, ‘I don’t want to go to school with a teacher.’ But I said, ‘its [your cousin], you know him.’ I said, that’s cool-I thought it would have been cool to ride with a teacher when I was in school.’

Holly, like other parents in this study, employed the availability heuristic, specifically by recalling her memory of her daughter Ann walking around a larger school and feeling intimidated. She then contrasted that memory with better feelings of walking through The McKinley School. Her connection to the school through her cousin also acted as a heuristic device. Her cousin’s employment at The McKinley School did not indicate anything about the school’s educational quality. Nevertheless, she used that as a
heuristic device in her decision making process. Her cousin’s presence provided her with an immediate sense of familiarity with the school and a way to transport her daughter to school so she was able to make a quick judgment with few facts.

Terrance and Bernadette

Terrance and Bernadette, a lower-income African American married mother and father of two school-aged children, used the geography of place of the traditional public school that they left as a heuristic device in their school search process. Specifically, they drew on their experiences of the neighborhood surrounding the school to make generalizations about the quality of the school. When asked if they believed that lack of money or resources played a role in the academic struggles of the school in questions, they responded,

Terrance: Its mostly attitude, mostly.
Bernadette: Yea.
Terrance: Its attitude.
Bernadette: And participation.
Terrance: And the area, collectively, as a whole with the parents. You know the surrounding, the immediate, surrounding geographic, demographic [area]. That plays a role in that attitude.
Bernadette: You have to learn it. We came from somewhat of that area but we had to learn that it was different.
Terrance: Even that, it was just a change of attitude. People don’t, people don’t really care about it. They don’t care. We made a conscious decision, we said, ‘We’re gonna do things a little differently’ (Terrance & Bernadette, 153-71).

Terrance and Bernadette decided to enroll their child in The Taft School for several reasons, but one of the key considerations they made was the “attitude” that they felt their child would be exposed to if they attended their traditional public high school option. They did not evaluate formal information on the schools in their choice sets. Instead, their
experiences of the community surrounding the school had a greater impact on their decision making process than any rational comparison of several schools.

**XII. What Place-Based Aspects of Schools did Parents use as Heuristic Devices?**

All parents involved in this study employed their experiences of the schools in their choice sets as geographical places in one form or another as they conducted their search process. This is true of the five parent cases described above and of the other parents who participated in this study, though typically to a lesser extent. The question remains, what aspects of the schools did parents draw on as they constructed a sense of schools as geographical places? Although each parent’s set of experiences is different, the aspects of the schools that provided those experiences fall into four main categories: the student body, the physical building, the community surrounding the school, and parents’ personal sense of familiarity with the school in terms of personnel, school culture, and educational practices. Each of these four aspects was derived through one of three sources: Personal interaction, formal informational materials, and social networks. For example, parents might experience the student body through personal interaction with the student or they might experience the student body by hearing about it through their social networks. Likewise, parents might interact with the teachers at a school on a personal level or find out about the teachers via promotional materials.
Aspects of Schools

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Table 2. How did Parents Experience Aspects of Schools’ Geography of Place that were employed as Heuristic Devices? This table details the aspects of the schools that parents experienced and the sources of information that shaped their ideas of schools as geographical places. Note that parents overwhelming gained information about schools via their personal interactions and social networks—both “informal” sources of information. Only two parents’ views of the school as a geographical place were shaped by formal informational materials. This highlights the important role that informal informational sources played in developing parents’ views of the schools in their choice sets as geographical places.

Aspects of Schools

**Student Body.** Parents observed the student bodies of the schools in their choice sets in multiple ways including personal interactions while visiting the school, through pictures in physical, school-produced informational sources such as fliers and posters,
and via their social networks. Most parents, when polled about their preferences for the student body at their child’s school, do not claim that race matters in their search process. However, Buckley and Schneider found that parents admitted that they considered race much more when they were polled anonymously via a website on the internet (2007, p. 116-18). Parents will not likely admit that they consider race in their decisions about where to send their child to school out of embarrassment. But it is clear that parents do consider the racial makeup of the student body when they are able to make their decisions anonymously. Parents used memories of the student body as heuristic devices, particularly because the visceral experience of walking past or interacting with the students.

Parents in this study used their impressions of the student body as heuristic devices to help them make decisions. Kathy believed that the students at Brookestone High School were “distressed” and had “attitude.” While she did not claim that the students’ race played a significant role in her decision making she either did not admit or did not realize that students’ race and socioeconomic status played a role in her decision making process. Likewise, Kim was able to form an impression of the students at The McKinley School that she derived from the pictures that were put up for the informational meeting. Based on the pictures she saw she believed that the students at McKinley were more socially adept and that her son would have a better experience than the other schools where he felt like the students were “geeks.”

Parents also drew on their experiences of the student body to draw conclusions about the schools’ safety. Victoria, who felt that her daughter was too involved in
“drama,” arguing, and even physical fights with other students at her previous large, public high school, was attracted to The McKinley School because, “When they said there’s only been twelve fights in twelve years [since the school began]. I mean, one fight per year. One per year! That’s good. So there’s no reason for failure. The door is open for you to be successful, you can do this and I think she [will get] along better now” (Victoria, 293-96). Victoria was able to use one fact about the student body at The McKinley School—twelve fights in twelve years, or just one fight per year—to draw larger conclusions about how her daughter would perform there. This heuristic device allowed her to make a decision regarding The McKinley School based on just a small portion of the available evidence.

**Physical School Building.** Many parents used their experiences of the physical school building as heuristic devices in their decision making processes. While Schneider, Teske, Roche, and Marschall (1999) considered the impact that physical damage, particularly broken windows, had on parents’ perceptions of the school’s academic quality, parents in this study considered the size of the school, both physically and in terms of the number of students served, when making their decisions. Parents who participated in this study were not impacted by the physical quality of the school building. Instead, they were attracted to schools based on their physical size. Parents typically were drawn to small schools and turned off from large schools. They often associated a large school building and student body with a lack of personal attention for their child.
Parents’ past experiences with their child’s schooling impacted their choices in deep ways. Particularly, parents of children who previously attended large schools often associated their child’s academic struggles with the size of the school and being ignored by teachers. Conversely, parents whose children had previously attended small schools typically felt that their children were given adequate attention but feared that they would get lost when they transition to a large school environment. Parents often employed these memories and fears of large schools as heuristic devices. They did not consider the actual ratio of students to teachers, the number of support staff, or measures of academic quality such as test scores state assessments of the schools in their choice sets. Instead, they relied on the feeling that their student would not fare well in a large school environment as a heuristic device. Victoria explained her perception of The McKinley School as “small,” saying, “I would prefer a . . . smaller class size. I feel like they should have smaller class sizes to get the kids more attention. That’s what the parents are looking for, most parents are looking for smaller, more direct, also more open-space learning” (Victoria, 482-86). Marla relied on her personal history with a small school as a heuristic device in her decision making process. She said, “I went to a small high school and . . . You just have an advantage when your class size is smaller and you can get more attention from the teachers and I want them to at least try and look for something like that.” Marla’s daughter did not have a significant experience in a school, large or small, because she was homeschooled. Nevertheless, Marla was able to draw on her personal experience as a heuristic device to help her reach a conclusion.
**Surrounding Community.** Parents relied on their experiences with the community surrounding the school in their decision making processes. The two schools in this study, even when they are restricted in terms of where they may draw their student body, are often made up of students from different communities (Information Meeting Observation). Nevertheless, parents draw on their perceptions of the community surrounding the school to reach conclusions, some accurate some not, about the quality of the school. Parents can take many messages related to school quality from the surrounding community but they typically fall into one of two categories. First, parents drew conclusions about their child’s safety at the school based on their perception of the community’s safety. Kathy worked with a Christian youth organization in the neighborhood where the majority of Brookestone High School’s students lived. Her experiences of the students who she worked with in the community led her to believe that her son, Dylan, would be bullied.

Second, parents drew conclusions about the quality of the school based on their perceptions of the academic ability of the students and the resources that the surrounding community may or may not be able to provide. If there are too many “disadvantaged” children in the surrounding community, it is likely, in many parents’ minds, that the schools’ overall academic quality will suffer because teachers will be too busy in remedial lessons. This was true, again, of Kathy who believed that the students at Brookestone High School had too many things working against them.

**Personal Familiarity.** Parents’ personal familiarity with the school was an important component of their understanding of the school as a geographical place and
played a key role in their decision making process. Many parents began their search with little or no knowledge of the schools in their choice sets. As they learned more about the school, particularly through their personal interactions with staff and students, they constructed a sense of familiarity. This sense of familiarity played a significant role in their relationship to the school as a place. Massey’s call to view geographical places as things that change over time (1994) is important because parents’ views of the schools as a place changed over time as they grew more familiar with the school. Because parents’ processes of constructing familiarity with the schools often involved personal, short experiences, their sense of familiarity with the school could be used as a heuristic device. Interview data demonstrates that parents took much from their momentary interactions with staff and students and that these interactions often outweighed more formal sources of information as parents conducted their search process.

Parents gained familiarity through “friendly” or warm personal interactions with teachers, administrators or the student body. Bernadette felt a sense of belonging and familiarity at a previous school because “we’re all working together for the same goal. It’s your part and it’s our part. So if we need to tell you, ‘Oh, its whatever [problem with the student] today.’ Or, you tell us, ‘they didn’t have a good day.’ It goes back and forth. This is a group project to make sure they get the best education” (Terrence and Bernadette, 268-71). Bernadette contrasted this feeling of familiarity at the previous school that they liked with their son’s current middle school saying, ”at the one school we really didn’t get that so that was something I look forward to [at The Taft School]” (Terrance and Bernadette, 272).
Parents also wanted to see the school for themselves. Latoya explained that the thing that most helped her make a decision was “going out there to see the school for myself and seeing the people [who] helped me” (Latoya, 65). These interactions become visceral and available memories that stuck out to parents, typically more than any facts or figures associated with the school’s academic quality. This was especially true of parents who had bad experiences at other schools and could juxtapose those “cold” interactions with the “warm” interactions that made them feel like they were a part of the school. Terrance described his feelings about The Taft School, saying, “It just feels right.” This was in contrast to their interactions with people at their son’s large, traditional public school where Terrance and Bernadette felt that they were not given the proper amount of attention that they needed to adequately address their son’s needs.

Sources of Information about Schools

Parents developed their conceptions of schools as geographical places by experiencing aspects such as the student body, physical school building, surrounding community, or by gaining a sense of personal familiarity with the school. They derived these experiences from three sources of information: personal interaction, formal informational materials, and via their social networks.

Personal Interaction. Parents gained a sense of schools as geographical places through their personal interactions with personnel and students at the school, the physical building, and the surrounding community. Parents also drew on their own historical
conception of the school or community as a place. This typically involved ideas about the safety, economic outlook, and populace of the community surrounding the school.

**Formal Information Sources.** Parents’ sense of schools as geographical places was also constructed through the formal informational sources that they used to learn about the schools. These information sources were either created by the school or a state entity and were typically intended for one of two reasons. First, formal informational sources were intended to promote and advertise the school. These typically included information about the school, pictures of the school and/or student body, and along with information about contacting the school for interviews and attending informational meetings. Second, formal information provided “objective” facts about the school. These sources of information typically included information about student test scores, assessments of the school, and facts about student demographic information, school size, attendance rates, etc.

The interesting thing about the formal informational sources in this study is that while parents typically trusted the information that they provided (i.e., they did not question the validity of the state’s rating system with terms such as “continuous improvement,” “academic watch,” or “academic emergency”), they did not consider the information to be as useful as their own personal interactions in the school, experiences of the people associated with the school and surrounding community, or the information gained through their social networks.

Many parents did not even access school or state produced “formal” materials to aid them in their school search process. Of those who did access school-produced
materials, they could not provide specific details about the way that they gathered, stored, and analyzed data from official information sources. At no point did a parent systematically compare schools via school or state-provided official information. Parents did learn about schools from official sources, most commonly school websites, but did not end up using these information sources to the same extent that they used informal experiences of the schools, particularly in terms of their geographical place.

**Social networks.** Parents used information provided by their social networks—the networks of relationships with friends, family, co-workers, close relationships and distant acquaintances that provide support, information, and access to institutions—as they conducted their search process (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Granovetter, 1973; 1983; Wellman & Wortly, 1990). This information, though highly informal, played a large part in shaping their conceptions of the schools in their choice sets as geographical places. Holly explained her search process, saying “I would search a lot on the computer and then just by word of mouth, asking people. Um, friends, family, co-workers, what their experience was, what schools they knew about and had first-hand knowledge of and what they thought” (Holly, 144-46). She initially acclimated herself to the charter school landscape in the city by searching on the internet but her most trusted sources of information came through her social networks.

Mark Granovetter distinguished between “strong ties” and “weak ties” in social networks (1973). Strong ties consisted of individuals’ immediate families, close friends, and people who they interacted with on a daily basis. Weak ties consist of people who individuals vaguely know or know as an acquaintance. Examples of weak ties might
include old high school classmates, friends of friends, and distant work contacts. The key difference between strong ties and weak ties is that “the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (Granovetter 1973, 1361). This is not to suggest that strong ties are naturally more useful to individuals than weak ties. Granovetter described the “strength of weak ties” in social networks because weak ties grant access to institutions, information, and other opportunities that would never be available to someone if they only sought information through their immediate friend and family ties (Granovetter, 1973; 1983).

Social networks are key to individuals’ ability to gain information, knowledge, and access to institutions and are not necessarily bound by social class but they often exist within and along class lines. Therefore, they are key components in the formation and extension of social capital, “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures” (Portes, 1998, p. 12). Granovetter describes the relationship between social networks and social capital, explaining that those with effective social networks can “organize for common goals easily and effectively whereas others seem unable to mobilize resources, even against dire threats” (1973, 1373). This ability to “organize” to achieve common purposes is key to gaining and maintaining social capital because it allows certain groups to work together, thus strengthening the group and the ties within it while other groups who do not have the capacity to organize lose social capital as they are often broken up and defeated. Money, power, and access are key to the status of social networks as well, and
people will often form relatively rigid, defined, and exclusive networks along the lines of power, money, and access to key institutions.

Parents used social networks extensively in their search process. Some parents used weak ties—co-workers and other people they knew but were not close to, while others relied on strong ties—family members or teachers who provided recommendations. Social networks were critical to the formation of parents’ conception of the charter schools in this study. Parents found out about key place-based geographical aspects of the schools such as the student body and the surrounding community from people in their social networks. Furthermore, the school could be legitimized through social networks because parents felt like the information they received from other people was more trustworthy than the information provided by the school via formal means. Kim explained this, saying, “for me personally the recommendations that I trust [are important]. People who I know leading me there is really one very important factor” (Kim, 255-57). Kim also knew someone at who worked at The McKinley School. This added to her sense of familiarity with the school as a geographical place. She explained, “The fact that I knew someone who was there made me very comfortable, not that she’ll be there with him but like my friend works there, her son went there. . . . I know her enough to sort of trust her about things” (Kim, 261-64). Social networks, then, provide information about schools and provide a sense of familiarity for parents.

Ball and Vincent described social networks as “the grapevine . . . a collective attempt to make sense of the locality and particular features within it (in this case, schools). It works through and is animated by story-telling, rumour and gossip” (1998,
The imagery of social networks as a grapevine—a mass of interconnected and tangled connections—applies to this study as well. Parents typically heard about schools via side conversations and through rumors about the schools but and they rarely obtained comprehensive and fully reliable information. Ball and Vincent also highlighted the informal nature of “grapevine” information. This was true of the information that parents in this study received via their social networks. They often relied on rumors about schools, other parents’ limited perceptions or experiences of the schools, or vague senses about charter schools in general, derived through a combination of their social networks and media sources.

It is clear that parents considered aspects of the geographical place associated with the school to help them make quick decisions with relatively little or inadequate formal information. Furthermore, no parent completed this process in a purely rational manner, opting instead to draw on memories of visceral experiences to guide their decisions and from informal information via their social networks. This study has several implications for school choice policy and future research studies on the parental school search process.

**XIII. Conclusion**

*Implications*

This study yields several implications for policy makers, charter school leaders, and advocates for parents who are engaged in the charter school search process. The primary finding—that parents employ heuristic devices related to schools’ geographical place in their decision making process—problematicizes the assumption that free market
strategies for education reform will result in significant aggregate improvements in education. This is not to say that schools cannot identify and implement certain policies or practices that will draw parents to them. It is also not to say that it is impossible for a free market, competition-based approach to lead to aggregate improvements in education. Both of those issues are beyond the scope of this study. However, this study does provide valuable insight in a few key areas.

Parents did not make their decisions based on rational choices associated with identifiable criteria. A market-based solution requires two things in order to bring about educational improvements. First, parents need to make their decisions based on identifiable aspects of the education offered by schools and/or measurable educational outcomes. Next, schools need to identify those aspects and outcomes and make further improvements related to them. Parents in this study relied on the availability heuristic in their search process. While it is unclear if this paid off for parents in the form of good educational decisions for their children, it is clear that their search criteria were not the result of some long, drawn out, and well informed search process. Rather, parents relied on their visceral, available experiences and memories of interacting with the school as a place. The reliance on impressions and experiences over identifiable educational outcomes presents an issue for those educational policies that rely on parent choice as a driver of market-based reform. Parents in this study did not collectively identify any actual educational practices that drew them to the schools in question. Instead, parents were drawn to the schools based on things like student demographics, the friendliness of the staff, their social networks, and the physical characteristics of the school building.
This study is problematic for neoliberal approaches to education reform which rely on market-based solutions to problems of educational equity and quality. Neoliberal approaches assume that the market will work to increase quality and efficiency. However, there is nothing in this study to suggest that parents’ work will raise aggregate school quality through market mechanisms. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that parents will expend significant amounts of energy and time to track down information about schools. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that parents would even use more formalized sources of information. This, of course, does not disprove the market model of education reform but it does present some problems because parents made their decisions in sometimes irrational ways while advocates of market-based reforms assume they will act rationally in their own self-interest.

There are several implications for charter school leaders. First, parents’ experience of their school as a geographical place can have a profound impact on where they end up enrolling their child. The aspects of geographical place associated with a school provide a first impression to parents, and, as this study demonstrates, certain parents will make decisions based on those impressions, regardless of the school’s academic quality. In an educational environment where every additional dollar matters, especially as budget cuts loom large in many states (Oliff, Mai, & Leachman, 2012), it is vital for charter school leaders to bring in as many students as possible each year. In order to do this they should pay attention to the immediacy of the role of geographical place in parents’ choice processes. However, there are certain things that charter school leaders cannot and should not do in order to create a “place” that is conducive to parents’
preferences. For example, the demographics of the student body appeared to play a role in parents’ choices. Charter leaders should not choose certain students over others based on their potential demographic appeal. Likewise, they should not rule out locating in certain communities because parents might associate negative aspects of the community’s “place” with the school. Instead, charter leaders can focus on providing a safe “place” for students. Charter school leaders should also focus on creating a friendly environment for parents and students who tour the school or attend informational sessions. Finally, charter leaders should not neglect the power of social networks to convey information about the school to parents of potential future students. It was clear that parents sought out and valued information that they received from their friends and families. This can be a valuable and cost-effective source of advertising for charter schools moving forward.

It was clear that parents desired formal information that was thorough, easy to find, and easy to understand. Parents were often frustrated because they knew that they were missing key pieces of information that would have significantly aided them in their search process. They also aware that there were schools in the city that they did not know about. Policy makers and advocacy organizations could aid parents by providing user-friendly information about all possible choices a parent can make.

The primary formal source of information that parents employed was schools’ websites. This presents three key problems that need to be addressed. First, this method favors schools that are wealthy or connected enough to build a professional quality website but does not necessarily give parents access to better quality schools. There are few research studies on the quality of charter school websites (Buckley & Schneider,
2007) but it is likely that parents who see a professional website will assume that the school is of high quality as well. Second, charter websites are highly decentralized and it is currently impossible for parents to know if they have researched all possible charters in their city. Parents had trouble finding any information source that provided a clear and updated list of the charter schools from which they could choose. A centralized and frequently updated information source would be helpful because it could provide parents with a comprehensive list of possible schools from which to choose. A source of information like this could also include schools’ locations and other relevant information about them. This would do much to help parents focus their search and it would reduce parents’ anxiety associated unknown aspects of the search process. Finally, internet-based sources of information advantage certain parents over others. Those who have the economic capital to afford internet access and the knowledge to log onto and navigate websites, hold a significant advantage over those who either cannot access the internet or do not have the know-how to successfully navigate through it. Therefore, state and local government agencies should provide clear and up-to-date information to parents who are interested in schools of choice. This idea was presented by Chubb and Moe in Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools (1990, p. 219-25) but has yet to be implemented in any significant way. This information should be available online but also in multiple other forms such as brochures and through presentations for parents with disabilities or language barriers.

It is especially important that states, districts, and charter leaders provide adequate information because it is clear that the number of charter schools is increasing
nationwide. Current trends in terms the number of new charters created every year indicate that parents’ search processes will only get more difficult as time goes on (NCES, 2011, p. 24-25) and it is likely that policies will continue to rely on market-based educational solutions (USDOE, 2010).

Institutional Ethnography: What do these findings say about “institutions” surrounding School Choice?

Lois Andre Becheley describes institutional ethnography as a thing that “takes up an exploration, description and analysis of a set of relations, conceived from a standpoint of some particular person or persons, whose everyday world of ‘work’ is organised by those relations” (2007, 1361). This study has examined the set of relations between traditional public, magnate, and charter schools, state and local policies, and socially constructed aspects of geographical space and place to understand how parents make decisions regarding school choice. Parents’ reliance on the availability heuristic throughout their search process reveals certain things about the “set of relations” that exist between the institutions in which they must function in order to successfully enroll their child in a charter school. While there is no one “institution” that parents had to navigate, an analysis of parents’ decision making process can reveal key aspects of the institutions in question.

First, parents did not identify a single, contained, and recognizable institution in which they could work. Many institutional ethnographies focus on processes associated with single institutions such as hospitals (Rankin & Campbell, 2009), school districts (Andre Becheley, 1999, 2005) and government assistance agencies (Ridzi, 2003;
Solomon, 1999). This is not to say that these institutions are not significantly impacted and complicated by outside forces. However, those who interact within singular identifiable institutions at least have an idea of what they are dealing with. Parents who search for charter schools have to work between multiple institutions such as a disconnected set of charter and private schools, their traditional public school option, state agencies and lottery systems, and agencies that provided them assistance with their child’s disabilities. Parents in this study often felt confused because they were not able to identify a full and satisfying set of school choices. They were frustrated because they knew that there were schools that they did not know about. This is contrasted to processes associated with singular institutions. For example, while an individual might be confused or frustrated with the process of getting their driver license renewed, at least they know that the Bureau of Motor Vehicles is the only institution in which they may do so.

Second, these institutions do not provide adequate and readily available information about all schooling options or specific aspects of the schools in question. Parents often searched for “formal” information on schools but were either dissatisfied with the information they received or did not feel that they received enough information. It is possible to find formal information on the schools in parents’ choice sets but the cost of finding that information can be high. Therefore, parents relied more on the availability heuristic as an effort-reducing device in their decision making process.

Finally, the institutions in question do not connect to each other in any meaningful way. One goal of many in the charter school movement is to reduce bureaucracy and increase school level autonomy (Chubb & Moe, 1990; School Choice Made Simple). One
unintended consequence of this autonomy is that schools are not easily identifiable and information about them can be inaccessible and inadequate. While public traditional schools are relatively easy to find and recognizable to parents because of their association with the community or because children are automatically enrolled if they do not choose another option, charter schools are only as recognizable as they can make themselves. This means that their ability to introduce themselves to potential students and parents is tied to their advertising budget, word of mouth, or other means of communication that are well out of their control.

It is clear that parents must navigate through many different institutions as they conduct their school search process. One key finding from this study concerns the disparate nature of charter, public and private schools and other state and local educational institutions. Because schools and other institutions are so disconnected, it is difficult for parents to gather and analyze information that they trust and understand. This can cause parents to be confused about their options, to make sub-optimal decisions, and, most relevant to this study, to use heuristic devices in place of more fully rational decision making processes.

Limitations

This study has several limitations, primarily related to issues of generalizability. It would be difficult to apply the findings of this study directly to schools outside of the state of Ohio because the policies vary between states. Furthermore, the limited scope of the study in terms of parent characteristics and the number of parents interviewed
prevents broad generalizations about all parents of school-aged children. Also, the parents in this study attended an informational meeting which requires a certain level or proactivity and forethought. This prevents even generalizing the results among parents of school-aged children who attend charter schools because not all parents whose children attend charters were as proactive in their search. While some may exert a significant amount of energy over a long period of time in their search, many others do far less work and make their decision with less information (Buckley & Schneider, 2007, p. 146-50).

Another limitation of this study is the narrow time frame in which it took place. I conducted one set of interviews over the course of three to four months and each parent was interviewed once. This was primarily due to constraints imposed by the time frame of my academic program and the scheduling of the charter school informational meetings where I recruited participants. Likewise, I was not able to conduct a second round of interviews because the informational meetings did not start back up until just a few weeks before the completion of this study. This study would have also benefited from a longitudinal approach that allowed for two to three interviews with the same parents over the course of a year. This would have allowed me to hear from parents at the beginning of their search process, the end of their search process, and at some point during their child’s first year of school at the school that they chose. These follow-up interviews would have allowed me to dig deeper into parents’ experiences, identify interesting categories and processes to further examine, and find out if they were satisfied with the school they chose or not. An analysis of parent satisfaction would have been especially
helpful because I could have drawn conclusions about the effectiveness of parents’
heuristics-driven decisions.

A final limitation to this study is its narrow interaction with school and state
produced texts such as school produced advertisements, informational materials,
applications, and other enrollment documents. A longitudinal study involving those
parents who ultimately chose to enroll their child in either The Taft or McKinley School
would have provided more information on how parents navigate textually mediated
enrollment processes. However, no parent had completed the entire enrollment process at
the time of their interview so it was impossible to identify text-based documents that
everyone had encountered. Additionally, the scope of this study is narrow, focusing on
how parents’ momentary memories, experiences, and impressions impact their decision
making process. For this purpose, then, it was not necessary to broaden the scope too
wide to include the entire process of searching, deciding, and enrolling. Had the scope of
the study been wider, the need to account for multiple textual documents would have
been more apparent.

Future Research

This study raises several issues that warrant further research in future studies.
First, it is clear that parents use the geography of place as a heuristic device in their
school search process. Future studies should place focus both more broadly, over larger
groups of parents and over greater periods of time, and more deeply, to analyze
individual parents’ decision making processes in greater detail. Additional studies should
also focus on the long-term impact of parents’ decisions derived through heuristic devices. Schneider, Marschall, Roche & Teske (1999) provided some insight into the efficacy of heuristic devices but a longitudinal study analyzing the outcome of parents’ decisions in terms of their satisfaction with the school and the actual quality of education received by their child would be beneficial. Future studies could also broaden our understanding of the range of heuristic devices that parents employ with a deeper focus on the use of cues and analysis of alternatives. It would also be valuable to study other aspects and characteristics of charter schools that parents use as cues in their search processes. This would provide policy makers and charter leaders with a deeper understanding of what parents actually look for in the schools in their choice sets.

It is clear, from this study and previous studies (Buckley & Schneider, 2007), that parents rely on internet-based information for their school search process. This trend toward greater reliance on the internet for official and personal task completion has been rising over the last few years and is likely to continue (Internet World Statistics). Therefore, future research should analyze parents’ use of the internet in their school search. This could be done at the micro level, examining how individuals employ the internet to gather information on certain schools and at the macro level to see how the structures, pathways, and ease of access to online information shapes parents’ search process. There are also certain demographic characteristics such as race and class that could profoundly impact parents’ internet search process.
Summary

This study highlighted the way in which parents used aspects of schools’ geography of place as heuristic devices in their decision making processes. Key findings included the identification of certain aspects of the schools that parents used to construct conceptions of schools’ geographical qualities. These included the student body, the physical school building, the surrounding community, and parents’ sense of familiarity with people at the school. This study also highlighted the way that parents learn about the aforementioned aspects of schools’ geographical place. These included personal experiences, formal informational materials and social networks. It is clear that these findings, while not totally undermining market-based approaches to education reform, introduce many questions about the efficacy of choice-based policies and practices. This is especially true of those policies that envision parents as rational chooses who focus on measurable aspects of schools such as academic quality or college acceptance rates.

Finally, there were implications for how policy makers, school leaders, and parents should approach issues of school choice. As school choice policies take new shape in the years to come, it would serve parents and students especially well for policy makers and school leaders to consider how schools’ geographical characteristic influence parents’ perceptions of the school as a geographical place and how they use that in their decision making process. Furthermore, it is crucial that policy makers consider the disparate and nature of the institutions surrounding charter schools and school choice that make information hard to find and incomplete.
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